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Chapter 1

"You're sending me away again?" Flame sobbed.

His mother, Avalanche, stood before him and looked at the ground. *She can't even look me in the eye.* He snarled in his head.

"Queen Ruby has graciously offered you a spot in her new healing center." His mother spoke and reached for the letter they had received today. The one from Queen Ruby.

"I had thought sending you to Jade Academy would help...but apparently not." Her voice became sour as she spoke the final part of the sentence. Flame knew she was hinting at the Stonemover incident. "Frankly I'm surprised there isn't a warrant for your arrest. If I were you, I would take the offer." She finally looked at Flame and her voice softened. "I think it's for the best."

What a fucking lie that was. Everything about this was just one big, shitty lie.

"And what are the healers supposed to do?! My face is *scarred* mother, it's already as healed as it's gonna get!" He growled and tore the letter from his mother's talons, ripping it in half. He lashed out to hide the swelling of tears that was building up behind his eyes. *Who am I kidding? If I were her I would send me away as well.*

He paced around the small room that he and his mother shared in Possibility. Most of the dragons that had made up the talons of peace resided here or in the other town that the leader was building near the mountains. For all the praise going around about this town, Flame found it just as terrible as any other place. Dragons still stared at him like he was a freak. He knew they were mocking him behind his back. Laughing at his scar. They thought he was an ugly monster...and now so did his mother.

The only dragon he had ever trusted and loved now couldn't even look at him. His own mother hated him. And it was all because of this *fucking* scar.

No. It's all because of those fucking NightWings and that dead fucking SandWing. Rage roiled up in his chest and his common fantasy of ripping off every SandWing's tail and using them to stab all the NightWings to death came to mind.

A gentle brush of his mother's wings against his own stopped the thoughts. She gently took his chin and wiped away the tears that had been falling. He hadn't even noticed them.

She sighed deeply. "Please, Flame. Don't fight this. You're going, and that's that," she said and let go of his chin. "I'm going to write a reply to Queen Ruby and tell her that you have agreed to go." His mother turned away from him and sat down at her desk where she began to write on a piece of parchment paper. Every word written was like a dagger in his heart and a punch to the stomach. She was sending him away again.

Unable to watch he sauntered over to the window of their small place and observed the dragons passing by. Some walked with friends, others with young dragonets, some with lovers.

None of them deserve happiness or love. Life fucking sucks and then you die. That's it.

Flame glanced back at his mother as she continued to write the letter.

Especially if you're as unlovable as I am.

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Umber sat nervously in the extremely vast and extremely empty throne room of Queen Moorhen. The dark gray granite floors beneath him were so clean that he could see his reflection. He could also see the reflection of the mud that had fallen off of his body and onto the floor. Vast columns held up a domed ceiling of deep pink marble and the whole room was opened to the warm breeze that
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rolled over the surrounding swamp gardens through giant archways.

Despite the inviting warmth of the sun and friendly croaks of nearby frogs Umber still felt anxious and he knew Sora felt even worse. They had returned to the Mud Kingdom a few weeks ago after Sora's...incident and had gone straight to the Queen to tell her what had happened.

They had been instructed to stay within the Mud Kingdom as Queen Moorhen corresponded with Queen Ruby, Glory and Glacier about the appropriate punishment for Sora. After all, a SkyWing and NightWing had been killed, a RainWing injured and an IceWing almost killed. Now they had been called to the throne room for the results.

A choked sob from Sora punctured the silence as she silently began to weep.

Umber immediately extended a wing and wrapped her in a hug. "Shh. It'll be alright," he whispered for the hundredth time. "Moorhen is a reasonable Queen. She won't let anything bad happen to you." At least he hoped he was right.

"W-what if they kill me?" She cried into his shoulder. "I killed those two dragons, hurt Tamarin and tried to kill the IceWing princess. I would say it's a reasonable punishment."

His answer was interrupted by a commotion at the front of the room where Queen Moorhen emerged from a hidden door. The door led straight to her throne which was placed on an elevated stage above the main floor, but rather than taking a seat Moorhen climbed down the stairs and greeted the dragonets on the main floor as equals. The gems embedded in her scales sparkled in the sunlight.

"Hello Umber and Sora. Thank you for meeting with me." She dipped her head and then turned a concerned gaze to Sora. "How have you been doing?" She gently asked.

Sora quickly wiped away her tears. "I am living each day as they

come," she answered honestly.

Moorhen nodded gently. "That is a wise thing to do," she paused. "Of course, you know why I asked you to come today."

Umber's heart had dropped to his stomach which was already a turbulent sea of anxiety. He half expected Sora to start weeping again. But she didn't. Taking a deep breath Sora squared her shoulders and looked Moorhen straight in the eyes. "I am ready for my punishment," She said.

A warm burst of admiration at his sister's bravery spread in his chest, but the look on Queen Moorhen's face washed it away.

The Queen spoke to Sora with a grim tone. "You do realize that what you did is considered by some to be unforgivable?" She asked. Sora nodded but Umber could tell she was fighting back tears. *Oh, Sora. Whatever happens I will be there with you, I promise.* He wound his tail with hers to show his support.

The Queen took a breath and continued. "However, I do not believe you are a criminal and neither do the other queens."

Hope sparked in Umber's chest and he squeezed Sora's tail.

"War is never easy," Moorhen continued. "Especially for dragonets. Queen Ruby believes it leaves a type of wound that cannot be seen. A wound that is in the head and heart. Instead of bleeding out it changes how be behave, think and even feel. Ruby thinks that is what has happened to you."

Umber furrowed his brow and Sora cocked her head in confusion. "In my head?" She repeated and held a talon to her forehead as if she was trying to locate the injury.

"Yes," the Queen answered. "In the Sky Kingdom Ruby is setting up a vast new hospital and as part of this project she is testing and training a new type of doctor. She calls them Soul Healers and they are meant to heal those unseen wounds caused by the war. After much debate we have decided that the best option would be for you to go to these doctors until you are properly healed and able to

return to life in the Mud Kingdom."

Umber's mouth dropped open and Sora looked just as surprised.

"So...you're not going to execute me?" His sister timidly asked as if afraid to remind Moorhen of that option.

Moorhen hissed in disgust. "Of course not!" She growled.

"And you're not going to imprison her?" Umber added.

This time Moorhen have a deep sigh. "I don't think you belong in prison, Sora. I truly don't. Now that the war is over we must begin a time of healing and forgiveness...for everyone."

The anxiety in Umber's stomach unraveled and he pulled his sister in for a tight hug, forgetting that they were in the presence of their Queen. Sora hugged him back and he could feel the tension in her shoulders relax.

Eventually they pulled away, both smiling. "I'll go with you to the Sky Kingdom! I'll be with you every step of the way." Umber quickly offered but then turned a questioning gaze to Moorhen. She nodded and smiled, indicating he was allowed to go.

The sibs hugged again.

"I can't believe we're going to the Sky Kingdom," Sora spoke with a laugh that was equal parts nervous and excited.

"Yeah," He agreed.

Chapter 2

It only took Sora and Umber half a day to reach the Sky Kingdom. They would have gotten there sooner but they made several snack stops along the way.

Moorhen had decided they didn't need any escorts, trusting the sibs to follow orders or face the consequences. Of course, their orders weren't hard at all: Go to the Sky Kingdom and don't come back until you feel healed.

They had just crossed the Claws of the Cloud Mountains and Umber noted how the rocky terrain slowly shifted into thick forests full of prey scent. His mouth began to water again. *Mmmmm food,* he thought.

A quick wing check from his sister brought his attention back to the present.

"Are you thinking about eating *again*?" She laughed. It was so wonderful to hear her laugh. The sun was warm and the sky a sharp blue. Sora and Umber flowed along the airstream that connected the mountains to the Sky Kingdom, their wings feeling lighter than they had for years.

He still couldn't believe the war was really over. But it was. His brother Clay and the other Dragonets of Destiny had save them. Umber's mind began to wander and he thought of his old winglet.

I wonder what Turtle is up to. I hope he wasn't too lonely when I left. I should write him a letter...or get Sora to help me write a letter. I didn't stay at the Academy long enough to learn how to read and write...can you even send letters to the Kingdom of the Sea? Wouldn't the parchment get all soggy? OH! I wonder what Qibli's up to!

Qibli's handsome, roughish face came to mind. His intelligent yet kind eyes that held a dab of mystery to them. And of course his cool scar that zigzagged across his snout. As much as he adored that

beautiful dragon he knew his infatuation was one sided. When Qibli had stepped into the room that day Umber had noticed the way the SandWing had looked at Moon. Even in the brief time Umber was there he could see their relationship growing.

But he didn't mind. He was just thankful to have met Qibli to begin with.

*I'm sure there will be plenty more handsome dragons in my future, h*e joked to himself with a big smile on his face. Soon the forest became less dense and small villages and dwellings began to appear. These villages soon turned to towns, and then to cities and soon enough Queen Ruby's palace came into view.

"Oh my mud slides! Would you look at the size of this place?" Umber yelled to his sister. It was easily three, no, FOUR times larger than Moorhen's palace with startling tall towers that reached so high that they split the passing clouds.

And right next to the palace was something Umber had never seen in any of the pictures or descriptions of the Queen Ruby's palace. Attached to the castle was a massive, roofless colosseum that was equal in height to the palace walls. At first Umber was reminded of the infamous fighting arena that Queen Scarlet had made but this one didn't have benches lined along the inner walls. In fact the walls were so high Umber couldn't even see what was inside. However, the outer wall was punctured with hundreds of windows indicating rooms of some sort on the other side. As Umber got closer he could see there were more of these roofless dome structures.

There were five in total. Four of them were arranged in a diamond shape with each colosseum facing North, East, South or West, and each was the size of a palace. They were all connected to each other via arched walkways and all walkways led to a central domed building that was three times larger the others. It was like a vast city all on its own and elegantly wedged between all the buildings were numerous gardens.

"That's the new healing center," Sora gentle voice indicated.
*Wow,*Umber thought.

"So...should we go there first?" Umber asked and Sora nodded.

"Queen Moorhen said they would be expecting us. We just need to find the front desk... I'm sure it's around here somewhere."

"Let's land. Maybe we'll see an entrance on the ground," Umber suggested and the two began a lazy spiral down to land outside of the west-most building.

Umber had seriously underestimated the size of these things. As they got closer to the ground the buildings just seemed to keep growing until Umber felt like an ant staring up at a mountain. Luckily the entrance was easy to find as it was a simple archway that was half as tall as the building itself. There was a sign draped right above it that read WELCOME VETERANS in bold, red painting. At least that's what Sora had quietly told him.

"Alright, found the entrance. Check!" Umber pretended to check off the first item on a list and Sora giggled. "Next thing to do is find the front desk. Let's go in!"

Umber led the way as he and Sora entered the grand building. Despite the imposing walls there was a nice breeze rolling through. No doubt due to the three other large archways that were embedded in the walls. One to the right, one to the left and one straight ahead. Each led to one of those roofed walkways Umber had seen from the air. He knew those walkways led to the other buildings as well.

"I have a hunch that the front desk will be in that big main building. Whaddya think?" Umber turned to Sora who just nodded. Umber furrowed his brow at his sister's silence.

Oh no. She's feeling anxious again. Umber brushed his wing against hers and gave her a reassuring smile. "Come on, let's go find this front desk already so we can go and get something to eat."

Sora only smiled but it was better than nothing. As they walked through the building to reach towards Umber took it the interior design. There were five floors in total that lined the high walls. Each floor had nice, wide walkways decorated with large vases of

flowers and comfy sitting spaces. There were probably around thirty rooms on each floor, the entrance-ways to the rooms themselves were simple sliding doors. There was no roof so the building was open to the sunlight but a large tarp was folded tightly around the rim to be used for rainy days.

In the center of this building were plenty of tables and chairs for meeting with friends, but there were also crates stacked off to the side. *Wow, this place is so new they still haven't set everything up!* Umber realized.

Well, I guess that means there won't be too many dragons here yet. Hopefully Sora and I can explore the place without her feeling too anxious.

They *finally* reached the archway on other side of the building and entered the walkway that passed through a courtyard that looked to be another garden as well. Umber was actually surprised to see that there were dragons in the garden. They were mostly SkyWings and they were busy watering and planting flowers. *I wonder if they work here. This place is so large it must take a lot of dragons to run it.*

By the time they reached the center building Umber was starting to get excited about exploring the place. The first thing Umber noticed when they entered what that this building was very different than the others. There was a domed ceiling for one thing, unlike the tarps on the other buildings, and it was held up by thick columns of white stone. The bottom floor was opened like a ballroom with grand archways penetrating the walls that was connected to a path leading towards each of the four residence buildings that surrounded it. There was a dividing curtain down the center which of the room though, which blocked off the right side of the room.

Maybe it was still under construction? But to the left Umber saw a large dining area filled with numerous table and chairs for dragons to sit and eat. Multiple serving stations were set up along the walls which were attached to kitchens via large windows in the walls.

What was even better was that Umber could smell something wonderful coming from the kitchens.

"Can I help you two?"

Umber and Sora jumped at the sound of the voice. They turned around to see a small SkyWing female carrying scrolls under her wings. She was mostly orange with pink undertones and strange streaks of black running along her face, starting at her eyes and dripping down her neck in long streaks to rest on her shoulders like a sash.

"Er, yeah, we're looking for the front desk," Umber answered. "We were sent here by Queen Moorhen." The SkyWing perked and began to shuffle through the scrolls she was carrying.

"Oh of course! Umber and Sora! My name is Jet and lucky for you two I run the front desk, but since you're here now I might as well give you your welcome packages and show you to your room."

Umber nudged Sora and tilted his head towards the kitchen. "See, Sora. Just follow the food and everything works out." Sora grinned.

"So here is a map of the buildings, a schedule for different activities, the weekly menu for the cafeteria, and instructions for booking appointments at the spa and physical therapy sessions." The SkyWing passed Umber a large portfolio of papers and he handed them to Sora who began to browse them immediately.

"As for your chambers, well, Queen Moorhen has told us that you like to read, Sora," Jet addressed his sister who nodded shyly.

"Well...we decided that we would place your rooms in the building that holds the library."

A gentle gasp came from Sora. "You have a library?"

Jet smiled. "Yep. It's in the South building. Let's go there now."

Since they couldn't go through the spa, which had turned out to be the blocked off area to the right of the cafeteria, Jet led them on a shortcut through the gardens all while chatting about the numerous activates they could do here. Sora listened intently while Umber wondered what they had been cooking in the kitchens. As they passed a cluster of blooming apple trees Umber noticed a dragon

sitting beneath them reading in the shade. *No way...it can't be!* Umber's brain whirred with excitement. He would recognize that handsome face and roguish scar anywhere.

"Flame!" He shouted and bound towards the dragon. It was his old school friend...well maybe friend was a bit of a strong word, but still!

The SkyWing immediately closed the scroll he was reading and looked at Umber. His expression was a mix of annoyance and bewilderment...but mostly anger.

"What are you doing here?" Umber asked when he was in ear shot of the other dragon. "Aren't you supposed to be at Jade Academy?"

Slowly, Flame stood up, hiding his scroll beneath his wings. Then, with more venom that a RainWing's spit, said. "Fuck. Off."

Umber's stomach clenched and he held his wings in tight, making himself as small as possible. "O-oh, sorry I didn't mean to-"

But Flame was already walking away in a huff. He passed by Jet and Sora, giving them an equally venomous look and stalked away towards the west-most building.

Umber meekly returned to his guide and sister.

"Do you...know that guy?" Jet asked warily as she watched Flame disappear into the building.

Umber shrugged. "We went to Jade Academy together but never really talked....I guess now I know why."

"He's like that with everyone, but he hasn't attacked anyone yet so we let him roam around unsupervised," Jet confessed and then added with a hopeful smile. "But hey! Maybe now that he has a classmate around he'll lighten up."

Yeah...I doubt that, Umber thought.

Chapter 3

What are they *doing here?*

Flame fled the gardens as quickly as he could. He pushed his way past some gardeners as they watered a bed of lilies.

"Move!" He yelled at them shortly before passing through the arched entranceway to the west-most building. He scuffled around the maze of couches, tables, chairs, cushions and other shit that supposedly made up a lounge for dragons to hang out in during their spare time.

His room was on the first floor near the back. He quickly unlocked the door, ran inside, forcibly slid the door shut and locked it again.

WHAT THE FUCK ARE THEY DOING HERE?

He had hoped to leave Jade Academy and the whole Dragonet of Destiny bullshit behind. But NOPE. It seemed that life had another shitty gift to bestow upon him. It had presented him with the stupid brother and crazy sister of the oh so heroic Clay who was actually NOT even special in ANY way since the whole FUCKING prophecy had been a setup! *I would know since I was the DAMN BACKUP SKYWING.*

Flame took a deep breath and exhaled. The afternoon light poured into his humble but spacey room. There was a small sitting area and empty shelves to his right and just beside the window was a desk and chair. To the left, on a slightly elevated plateau, was a bed. Flame had arrived yesterday morning but his bag was still lying unpacked on the floor next to the desk.

There hadn't *really* been anything he needed to bring, but his mother had forced him to take an extra blanket and Flame had insisted on bringing his entire collection of graphic-scrolls, or

graphicolls as he liked to call them.

They were like scrolls, except the story was told in a series of pictures with little speech and thought bubbles for the characters. Flame had read them since he was a little dragonet. He would read them all night long while waiting for his mother to come home from her Talons of Peace business, hoping to spend a little time with her before she got up early the next morning and disappeared again for the day.

Those late night conversations were all the same.

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"Flame!" His mother shouted. "Did you stay up again*? You should be in bed!"*

"I know I know!" Flame raised his talons in defense. He had been waiting intently for her return outside her bedroom door. "But hear me out. I was hoping maybe we could spend tomorrow together. We could get ice cream or something and then go and see-"

"Flame." The sharp tone his mother used shut him up. "I can't. You know that. Everything the Talons of Peace do is to protect the Dragonets of Destiny so that they can grow up and end this war. That is our top priority, and therefore, it is my *top priority." She firmly nudged Flame into his bedroom with her wings and pointed at his bed. "Now. Go. To. Bed."*

Flame crawled into bed feeling empty. Perhaps Avalanche's motherly instincts finally kicked in because she paused before stepping outside of his room and turned back to him. In a softer voice she spoke. "I'm doing this for you, Flame. You'll understand when you're older."

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Oh, I understand perfectly fine, mother, Flame sneered in his mind. *I wasn't special enough for you. I wasn't destined to end the war like those wonderful Dragonets of Destiny so what was the point of spending time with me, right?*

Flame used to pretend that he was like those characters in his

graphicolls that had amazing powers. He would save Pyrrhia and then his mother would finally want to spend time with him and love him. But that never happened. Even when he had been part of that dumb backup group for the Dragonets of Destiny he STILL hadn't been able to see his mother. He tried to feel the anger, but instead he only felt the twisting pain in his heart. He swallowed hard, fighting against the urge to leave this shitty place and run back to his mother.

She wouldn't want to see me anyway. No one wants to see this face.

At this point Flame just wanted to curl up in bed and have a pity party for himself, but he couldn't even have the privilege of doing that since he had an appointment with his stupid Soul Healer today.

This is all such bullshit, he groaned to himself.

Flame removed the graphicoll he had tucked away under his wing and placed it in the bag with the others. The Welcome Portfolio was still lying on the desk where Flame had tossed it yesterday. He flipped through it until he found the paper telling him who his Soul Healer was and where their office was located.

The sun was beginning to sink in the sky and Flame knew he should leave now if he wanted to make it on time. He had promised his mother that he would make an honest effort to be healed...whatever the hell that meant.

And so, with all the spite and gloom he could muster, Flame followed the directions as they told him to go to room 134 on the second floor of the Center building.

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Flame sat in the small office of his Soul Healer. It had a window that opened up to the garden, comfortable cushions in the center to sit on and a small desk along the wall for the Healer to write on.

Flame's Soul Healer had turned out to be a SeaWing male. He was probably in his twenties, had blue scales mixed with a gross shade of moss green and was annoyingly larger than Flame. But most

importantly he was a giant, fucking prick

As soon as Flame walked into his office he had seen the quick grimace the SeaWing had made when he saw Flame's face.

Well get used to it asshole because this is it!

Now he sat on the fluffy pillow with a giant scowl on his face while watching the idiot Healer prepared a parchment for note taking. Finally the SeaWing spoke.

"I am very glad you could meet with me today, Flame. My name is Starfish and I will be your Soul Healer!"

Flame narrowed his eyes. "Are you an actual doctor? If I asked you to locate my kidneys would you be able to?"

Starfish furrowed his brow. "Yes, I am a real doctor so...yes I can locate your kidneys." The Healer then scribbled something on the parchment. Flame straightened up and growled.

"What the hell did you just write? I bet you wrote about how much you fucking hate me and wish someone else had gotten me as their patient! You're a peace of shit, you know that?"

"Actually I just wrote the date." Starfish turned the paper around to show Flame.

Flame snorted and hid his embarrassment with another question. "So what makes you a Soul Healer and not just a doctor? What's so special about *you*?" The question was laced with contempt but Starfish didn't seem to notice and perked.

"That's an excellent question! If you would like I could explain to you the additional psychological and emotional training we undertake to become Soul Healers."

Flame rolled his eyes. "Not interested," he answered. *If I wanted to sit through another lecture I would have stayed at that shitty academy.*

Starfish just nodded with a smile, not disturbed at all by Flame's attitude. *Does* nothing *bother this guy?*

"Alright, well why don't you tell me about yourself instead?" Starfish dipped his talon in ink and looked intently at Flame, eager to start taking notes.

Flame groaned and stared up at the ceiling. "Well, I hate this place. I hate you, I hate my room, I hate this office, and I hate everyone that's here...yep that's pretty much it."

The SeaWing loyally wrote each of Flame's words onto the paper. "Uh-huh, now tell me about the stuff you *like*."

"Nothing. This whole place is a dump."

Starfish looked up. "Then lets talk about something else. How about things you like to do in your spare time. Do you have any hobbies?"

Flame scratched his chin and thought for a moment. "I like cooking...and reading graphicolls," he admitted. Starfish grinned like Flame had just made his fucking day.

"You like to cook? That's wonderful! We have cooking classes here in the facility. You should try them out."

"What? No way!" Flame snorted. "I already *know* how to cook! I don't need to take *lessons* with a bunch of idiots."

The Healer set his paper down and looked gently at Flame. "I think it's important for you to engage in occupations that you enjoy. Don't think of it as being taught how to cook, but rather an opportunity to do something you like! I am sure if you asked they would let you cook whatever you wanted."

Flame stared at the ground and tried to look uninterested despite the fact that he was, indeed, interested. He *did* miss cooking. He used to do it for his mother when she came home from work and he had gotten fairly good at it. After a few dramatic sighs and grumbles Flame relented.

"Ok FINE. I'll go to one of these stupid classes. But if it's as shitty as I think it is then I'm out."

The Healer gave him a big, stupid grin. "Excellent! Shall I put you in

for the tomorrow's class?"

Flame slouched into his cushioned seat. "Yeah. Whatever."

With that idiot smile still plastered all over his face the SeaWing jotted down some more notes. "Fantastic! Now, let's get this session started."

Chapter 4

"You know Umber, you don't have to stay with me. I can do this on my own," Sora quietly pointed-out. They were sitting outside of Dr. Zephyr's office, Sora's new Soul Healer. This was their second day there and so far everything was going really well. They had eaten a delicious breakfast of fruit and roasted bull at the cafeteria and had spent the rest of the morning roaming the dew covered gardens. After a stern looking SkyWing had told them to stop splashing in the fountains they had retreated and decided to go early to Sora's appointment.

"I know you can," Umber smiled and nudged his sister. "BUT I did promise to be with you every step of the way," he countered. "So obviously that includes the first meeting with your Soul Healer."

Sora smiled with appreciation. All morning Umber could tell she had been nervous and he had decided to accompany her to the Healer's in hopes of easing her distress. So here he was, standing in an empty hallway, twenty minutes early for the appointment.

They could hear friendly chatter from within the room so they had assumed Dr. Zephyr was with another patient. It was therefore a great surprise when Jet stepped out alongside Zephyr. The two dragonesses looked near identical, both had orange scales with pink undertones, except that Zephyr was larger and did not have the characteristic black streaks on her body.

"Sora! Umber!" Jet exclaimed with pleasure. "You didn't tell me my mother was your Soul Healer!" She leaned in towards Sora and whispered mischievously. "You lucked out because she's the best Healer here."

"Jet!" Zephyr scolded her daughter with a laugh. "ALL the doctors here are wonderful and excellently trained."

Jet rolled her eyes. "Yes, OK, sure." She turned to Sora again and winked. "But really she's the best."

This managed to get Sora to actually giggle.

Zephyr shook her head in exasperation. "Alright, alright. Don't you have a front desk to run?"

The young SkyWing huffed. "Yeaaah, I guess I better get back to that thing called a JOB that I apparently have, but I'll see you guys later! We should hangout sometime," she called to them as she walked down the hall. Sora smiled and Umber waved goodbye with his wing.

"Now." Zephyr clasped her talons together, grabbing the attention of the two MudWings. "I am so sorry to keep you waiting, Sora. I had no idea you were out here."

His sister just shrugged and nodded. Umber spoke up quickly to fill the silence. "Uh, sorry that was our fault. We had nothing else to do this morning so we came early."

"Oh no, it's fine," Zephyr assured but turned a concerned gaze towards Sora. "Is everything alright, Sora? You seem nervous. Hopefully I haven't given off the wrong impression." The Healer's eyes were full of worry but Sora shook her head rapidly.

"Oh, sorry!" Sora squeaked. "I-I just don't talk very much when I'm anxious." Her voice came out in a wobbly, bare whisper.

Umber felt a wave of sympathy for his sister wash over him. *It'll be alright, Sora. I'm here for you!*

The Healer thought for a moment. She then gently grabbed Sora's talons in her own and looked intently at the young MudWing. "Sora, the whole purpose of me being here is to help you through whatever pain and suffering this war has caused you, and it is so SO important to me that you feel comfortable here and know that you can trust me. I just want you to know how much I truly care for you and your well-being. I don't want to rush you, but just know I am here for you," Zephyr finished and the warmth of her smile was like

being covered in the warmest, coziest mud imaginable.

Sora gazed up with wide eyes at the SkyWing. Finally she nodded shyly and squeezed Zephyr's talons in return. "Ok. I am ready to start," she spoke.

Umber and Zephyr met eyes for a moment and he nodded in approval. *A little kindness goes a long way with Sora. I think this Healer is a good match.*

"I'm glad to hear that." Zephyr stepped aside and motioned for Sora to enter her office. Just as Umber went to enter with her, Sora surprisingly placed a talon in his chest to stop him.

"I...want to try this on my own," she murmured. Umber stared at her in astonishment.

"Wha- are you sure?" He blinked in confusion at her sudden change in heart.

Sora nodded firmly. "Yes." She then gave him a hug, resting her chin on his shoulder. "I'll be alright," she whispered and then released him and hurried into the office. She turned back once to give him a reassuring smile.

"Uh, OK. I'll just wait out here for you!" He said and Zephyr turned to him.

"Why don't you go exploring?" She suggested. "When we're done here I can get Jet to take Sora to find you," she offered and then entered the room behind Sora, firmly sliding the door closed.

Umber sat in silence and stared at the door, his brow furrowed. Even though he was a bit confused he was immensely proud of his sister for doing this on her own.

OK...I guess I better find something else to do this morning.

Umber retraced his steps by going down the stairs which led back to the cafeteria. There were more dragons there now, at least twenty. *It looks like this place is beginning to fill up with new patients.* As he passed through he noted that dragons of all tribes were there,

and all were in a different state of injury. There was a SandWing just staring at the walls with empty expression, an IceWing with an uncontrollable tremor in his talons trying to hold a spoon to his mouth, and a SeaWing with a missing leg.

Umber shivered and looked away. He knew very well what war was capable of.

As he went to exit the building he ran into Jet. Literally. She had been carrying a pile of scrolls and slammed into him as he turned a corner. Both were apologizing profusely as they scattered to pick up the papers.

"Sorry! I wasn't paying attention to where I was going!" Umber explained and handed Jet several of her fallen scrolls.

"No, it was my fault. I am always running around this place doing errands for the Healers," she excused and began to stuff all the fallen scrolls into the crook of her folded wings. "Speaking of which, aren't you supposed to be with Sora and my mother?"

"Nah. They kicked me out," he joked. "Now I'm just wandering around wondering what to do next. Do you have any idea if there's anything fun happening today?"

Jet snorted in offense. She placed a talon on his shoulder and spoke, "Umber, I run the front desk. I know EVERYTHING that's going on around here."

"Uh..OK...so what's going on?"

Jet paused and thought for a moment. "Well, in about twenty minutes there's going to be cooking class on the third floor."

Umber fluttered his wings in excitement. "That sounds like so much fun! What room is it in?"

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Umber sat excitedly at one of the cooking stations near the back. There were four cooking stations in total, each was large enough for two chefs and all except Umber's station had two dragons present.
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They consisted of a large counter space made of wood that had knives, spoons, frying pans, pots, and cauldrons and every other cooking utensil ever made already present. At the front of the room was a giant stone oven that they would all be sharing.

The teacher had already passed out all the ingredients they would need for this dish.

"Alright chefs," an energetic SandWing spoke to the class of seven. "Today we're going to be making apple pie so if you would take out your apples I will teach you how thin you want to slice..."

The instructor was cut off as the door slid open and there stood Flame looking aggravated and annoyed. "Who the hell put this classroom at the other end of the fucking building?" He asked but didn't wait for an answer. He scanned the room and scowled. "Don't tell me we have to go in partners," he growled.

"You must be Flame, Starfish told us you would be coming," the instructor said with a strained smile.

"Whatever," Flame growled and marched over the only available spot...right next to Umber. Umber sat rigid and Flame passed by and sat on the other side of the station. The SkyWing threw him a look full of daggers and whatever greeting Umber was about to utter got stuck in his throat.

"As I was saying..." The SandWing continued. "We are making apple pie today, so, please take your apples and I will show you how to peel them."

The dragons all grabbed their peelers and apples and began copying their instructors. Umber found the little peeler beside the spatulas and began to work.

"You're doing it wrong." Flame's rough voice came from behind him and Umber jumped, nearly dropping the items in talon. Flame grabbed the apple and peeler from Umber and with more grace than Umber thought possible, peeled the apple in several moments. He then repeated this for the other apples and set them on the cutting board.

"Listen, I'm not here to follow some idiot's instructions so either you do what I tell you or get out," Flame hissed and Umber only gaped in confusion.

"Uh..."

"Just shut up and start slicing the apples. NO not like that, here, I'll show you."

Flame took a large cutting knife, scoffed when Umber flinched, and began slicing the apples thinly.

"Do you think you can manage that?" Flame asked condescendingly. He passed the knife to Umber who took it cautiously.

"Uh..."

"Just don't screw it up or I'll set you on fire," Flame encouraged. "I'm going to start on the pie crust." He scanned the ingredients and began putting all the dry stuff in one bowl and the wet ones in another. Umber gawked. *He doesn't even need a recipe book. He's doing this all from memory.*

Umber watched with amazement as Flame quickly and efficiently mixed the ingredients. What was even more surprising than Flame's skill was that he actually looked...happy while doing it. Or rather, less angry.

Umber finished chopping the apples and Flame didn't set him on fire. They covered the apples with brown sugar, lemon juice, cinnamon, and nutmeg and then placed them into the crust that Flame had already rolled out into a pie dish.

Finally they placed another layer of pie crust on top and placed it with the other three pies in the oven.

The aromas of apples, cinnamon and nutmeg were making Umber salivate and he stood impatiently by the oven, watching at the pie crust became golden and the filling inside began to sizzle. Umber turned around briefly to see where Flame had gone off to. He certainly wasn't talking with the other dragons there. Instead he was investigating the large storage room in the back.

Umber shrugged and continued to watch the food until he thought he was going to die from hunger. Finally, FINALLY, they were ready to come out of the oven and everyone chowed down on their creations. Flame showed no interest in eating the pie so Umber had it all to himself.

He took one bite and could barely move as waves of bliss washed over him. It was delicious! It was more than delicious. Umber had no words to describe it. He devoured it in seconds and licked the bowl clean.

"Gross. Don't MudWing's have any table manners?" Flame's scornful voice sounded behind him. Umber ignored the insult and decided to gross him out even more by licking his fingers clean. He was pleased when Flame grimaced.

Strangely enough Flame didn't insult him again. Instead he shuffled his feet nervously before speaking. "So...did you like it?"

Umber was so shocked by the change in temperament that he almost didn't answer the question. "What? Oh, yeah. It was amazing! The best pie I have eaten in my entire existence."

A ghost of a smile spread across Flame's face but disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Huh. Interesting, Umber noted. What had made this prickly dragon so self-conscious all of a sudden?

"Whatever. Just don't be so gross next time." Flame stormed out of the room and the tension that had been floating around vanished with him.

Umber watched him leave. Just the day before Umber had assumed Flame was nothing but an angry, cruel dragon but now... he wasn't so sure.

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After cleaning up the kitchen Umber went back to the second floor to meet his sister. Instead he found Dr. Zephyr sitting alone in her office.
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Zephyr looked up briefly from where she had been writing on the desk. "Hello, Umber! You must be looking for Sora. I think her and Jet went off to the library."

"Alright, thanks!" Umber dipped his head to the Healer and went to find his sister in the library. She wasn't there. He then checked the lounge in the west-most building. Not there either. He then searched through the gardens until he eventually found the two dragonesses outside of the cafeteria. They had scrolls in their talons and were discussing something quietly.

Umber breathed a sigh of relief. He had no idea why he had been so anxious. *She's not a dragonet. I don't have to be there to hold her talon for everything.*

He began walking through the empty cafeteria to reach them when the sound of clattering pots and pans stopped him. The kitchens were closed but someone was inside messing around. A head popped up in the kitchen window and Umber ducked down behind a table.

It was Flame.

Umber glanced at his sister and Jet as they chatted in the garden. He didn't need to go to them right away. First he wanted to see what this SkyWing was up to.

Chapter 5

"What do think you're doing?!" Umber popped his head into the kitchen window and hissed at Flame.

The SkyWing had had his head in a cupboard and at the sound of Umber's voice jolted and slammed it into the above shelf. Umber winced as Flame fell to the floor, cradling his head and letting out a long string of profanities. Umber crawled in through the window to join him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," Umber apologized when the swearing had ceased. Flame jumped up and faced Umber with a snarl.

"What the fuck do *you* want? Are you following me you weirdo?"

Umber's tail twitched in irritation. "No! I was just looking for my sister and found you doing...whatever it is you're doing." Umber motioned around to the messing kitchen.

A cloud of smoke blew from Flame's nostrils and into Umber's face. Umber tried to swallow his coughs.

"It's none of your business, so why don't you just fuck off and leave me alone." Flame turned away and picked up some sticks of wood that had been on the floor and took some more out of the cupboard. Umber watched him place the wood into the giant meat smoker at the back of the kitchen and lit it on fire with his fire-breath.

Umber pumped his wings in alarm. "Flame, what are you doing? Are you even allowed to be in here?" But the SkyWing ignore him and went to the counter where a dozens of ingredients were laid out. Cinnamon, brown sugar, salt, pepper, chili peppers, dried herbs and many other things that Umber didn't recognized were present and Flame was pouring them all into a giant mixing bowl.

"What's all that for?" Umber asked, approaching Flame and gazing curiously at the fragrant mix of spices.

"I thought I told you to get lost," Flame sneered without looking up.

"I'm not leaving until you tell me what you're doing." Umber squared his shoulders and prepared for another bash of insults. Flame turned on him, his eyes sparkling with fury, but paused. Just as soon as the anger had some, it had disappeared and Flame stood back observing Umber like he was trying to estimate the value of an old antique item.

"How much can you lift?" Flame abruptly asked.

"What?"

"Did I stutter? How much can you lift?"

Umber stammered while he thought. "Um, I don't know. A lot?" He shrugged helplessly.

Flame considered this for a moment before speaking. "How about this: I'll tell you what I am doing if you help me out with it."

Umber raised a brow in apprehension. "Well I know you're making some sort of smoked meat, I'm not *that* dumb. Besides, I don't want to do anything that'll get me and Sora in trouble."

Flame grumbled something under his breath and finally looked back up at Umber. "FINE. If you help me out I 'll...share my food with you."

At that moment Umber's stomach came to life with a gut twisting growl for food. Umber still wanted to say 'no' but his stomach forced him to ask the fatal question: "Well, what are you making specifically?"

Flame gave a wolfish grin, knowing very well he had found Umber's weakness. "I'm making my famous ten hour smoked Pork Body Medley with my grandma's secret seasoning recipe."

Flame sat with a smug grin on his face while Umber battled with

his stomach. *No, I can't break the rules! I don't want to get us in trouble. What if we get sent back to the Mud Kingdom? Would they kick us out?*

Despite all these worries Umber couldn't help himself. "...What would I have to do?" He asked but Flame took this to mean that Umber had agreed.

"Follow me. We need to go and get the meat."

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At the other side of the building was a cellar door leading to a vast underground storage room. It was cool and dry, perfect for storing foods and every variety. There were plenty of vegetables, grains, cheeses, some fruits and there was PLENTY of meat.

The meat was stored at the back. It all looked fresh; they probably brought it in daily. This only made Umber feel worse. "So...how much are we taking?" He tentatively asked. Flame stared up at the ceiling and did some sort of mental calculation. Finally he lowered his gaze and pointed to a stack of four giant hog carcasses.

"We're taking those," he decided.

Umber stared at Flame in bewilderment. "What? Why do we need so much?"

"Because we do. Now take these up with you." Flame loaded two pig carcasses onto Umber's back. Each was half his weight so the whole load was like carrying another MudWing. Flame carried two pigs himself and the carefully waddled out of the cellar and into the gardens. Flame went ahead of him, keeping low to the ground and peering around corners. Not that it helped any. They both had giant hogs on top of them. Even if no one saw them they would surely *smell* them.

What have I gotten myself into? Umber asked himself for the fifth time. Just as the cafeteria entrance came into view a voice shouted behind them. "HEY! What are you two doing?"

"Shit," Flame uttered and then turned to Umber. "Run!" He
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instructed before bolted for the cafeteria door. Umber followed in pure panic. *What am I doing what am I doing WHAT AM I DOING?*

The two dragons ran into the kitchen, dumped the meat onto the floor and Flame rushed to close the window and lock the door behind them.

"Are you crazy?" Umber shouted, his fear getting the better of him. "We can't just hide out in here! We have to go and speak to them!"

Flame shook his head. "No way. If they find out what we've done we'll be kicked out of the Healing Center."

Umber's stomach dropped. "WHAT!?" *I've ruined everything! Sora and I will probably have to leave and then what? Will we be imprisoned for not following the rules? Moorhen will be so disappointed!*

A knock came from the kitchen door. "Flame, would you please open this door?" A voice that Umber didn't recognize asked.

"Umber, I know you're in there as well." That was Dr. Zephyr's voice.

Umber couldn't do it. He had to face his crimes. Maybe they would just send him back and Sora would be able to stay here. He hoped she would be alright without him.

He ran and unlocked the door with misty eyes to face Zephyr and a SeaWing. "I'm so SO sorry I didn't mean to break the rules please don't send my sister away we didn't use the meat you can have it back!" He blubbered out and groveled on the floor.

Zephyr and the SeaWing exchanges confused glances. The SeaWing spoke first, giving Umber a gentle smile. "I was just coming to remind Flame to leave the door opened." His gaze became stern as it fell on Flame. "Flame, what did you tell this poor dragon you were doing?"

But Flame didn't answer. He was too busy roaring with laughter.

Umber looked to Flame, then Zephyr and then the SeaWing. "Am I missing something here?" He furrowed his brow.

Zephyr came and rested a calming wing over his shoulder. "I don't know what he told you, but don't worry. You're not in trouble. Flame has permission to be in here and use whatever ingredients he needs to make his dish."

"That's right!" The SeaWing added. "I convinced him to put his love of cooking to good use and help out at the cafeteria since he didn't find the cooking lessons challenging enough."

Umber whipped around to pin Flame with an accusing glare. "Why didn't you tell me? Why did you make me think I was going to get BANISHED from the Healing Center? I WAS FREAKING OUT!"

Flame was wheezing now. "I KNOW! You should have seen your FACE!" He hooted and went back into another fit of laughter.

While he was annoyed, immensely annoyed, the overwhelming relief of not being banished overpowered all other emotions and Umber actually began to laugh as well.

"Ok, I admit it. That was a pretty funny joke," Umber chuckled. Flame's own laughing calmed down and he seemed somewhat irked that Umber wasn't angry.

"Well, you're pretty stupid so it was easy to trick you," he insulted and the SeaWing cleared his throat.

"Flame, what did you say about negative comments?"

Flame glared back and grumbled some sort of answer that Umber didn't hear but apparently the SeaWing had as he smiled in approval. Flame then turned to Umber and mumbled some sort of apology. To be honest, Umber didn't really take anything Flame said to heart so he just accepted the apology with a shrug and carried on.

"So do you still need my help with the food?" Umber inquired.

Umber took great satisfaction in the confused expression that spread across Flame's face. "You...still want to help me?" Flame's face of confusion turned to one of suspicion as he narrowed his eyes at Umber.

"Well, yeah! I was promised food." The MudWing answered honestly. "And I'm not leaving until I get it."

Flame considered this for a moment. "Fair enough. Do you know how to cut up a pig?" He finally asked.

Umber scoffed. "Does a MudWing love mud?" He answered back. Of course, Flame didn't laugh at the joke and just grimaced.

"Fine. Just stay out of my way and do as I tell you and I won't throw you into the smoke pit." He agreed and handed Umber a cleaving knife to take apart the pigs. "And no more stupid jokes!" He added.

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Jet, Sora and Umber sat together at a table in the cafeteria. It was evening now and the smoked pig was ready to serve, just in time for dinner.

Umber and Flame had worked surprisingly well together. Umber was coming to realize that Flame was a lot easier to deal with when he was cooking. There were times when he actually seemed...nice. He taught Umber all about making the seasoning, what type of wood to use in the smoker and how hot to make the pit. All things that Umber had never even thought about.

By now the aroma of smoked pork filled the cafeteria as they impatiently waited for the serving station to be opened. Finally the window to the kitchen was opened and a dragon that wasn't Flame began passing out the servings. In fact Umber didn't see Flame around at all.

The three dragons got their plates of meat and returned to their seats to chow down. That was when Umber sank his teeth into the most tender, most flavourful and juiciest meat he had EVER tasted. Was it normal for food to make you cry tears of joy?

Finally Umber spotted Flame making his way through the tables and towards the exit. With a mouth full of food Umber called him over.

"What?" Flame snapped as he approached the table.
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Umber swallowed the food in his mouth and spoke. "This is delicious! Aren't you going to have some?"

Flame looked at Umber's plate and frowned. "Nah. I'd rather just go hunting for myself. I don't really eat the meals I make," he stated and stalked off leaving the three dragons to ponder his answer.

"Well that was weird," Jet commented.

"Yeah," Umber agreed as he cleaned the meat off a rib. *What a strange guy.*

Chapter 6

"So how do you like volunteering in the kitchen?" Starfish asked casually.

Flame thought about the question for a moment. It had been a week since he started helping out by making the meals. He had been given total creative freedom and he had used it to his advantage, making delicious foods that everyone complimented him on. And honestly, he was enjoying it a lot.

"It's OK," he answered and looked around Starfish's office in an uninterested manner. Starfish beamed at him.

"I am so glad to hear that! So would you like to keep doing it?"

Flame shrugged. "Sure. I have nothing better to do."

Starfish gave Flame an annoying grin and jotted something down on his paper. Flame tried not to get riled up. After forcing the SeaWing to show him everything he wrote down for the past week during their sessions Flame now knew that it was nothing offensive.

It was still fucking annoying though.

Starfish noticed his irritation and stopped writing. He cleared his throat apologetically and changed the subject. "So, I am glad to see you making friends."

Flame blinked in confusion. "What friends?"

"That nice MudWing, Umber," Starfish supplied and Flame snorted.

Umber. That annoying little MudWing who had insisted on helping Flame cook the meals. He would stumble around the kitchen wearing that stupid grin on his face, constantly snacking on the foods even before they were finished. What a little shit!

"He's not my friend! He's a nuisance," Flame snapped and folded his arms across his chest. Starfish gave him a troubled frown.

"Oh, I didn't realize you felt that way about him. Would you prefer not having him help you? I could speak with him if you'd like," the Healer offered and Flame paused.

He had meant what he said. Umber was *not* a friend. But he didn't necessarily hate the guy...at least not anymore. And even though he was annoying it was helpful to have another set of talons in the kitchen.

Flame tugged at a loose thread on the cushion he was sitting on, refusing to look the SeaWing in the eyes. "No, it's fine," he grumbled and left it at that. Starfish gave Flame a confused look but didn't push any further.

"Well as long as you're happy then that's all that matters," Starfish said with a tight smile.

Flame narrowed his eyes. *What's his problem? Usually his grin's so large it takes up half of his stupid head.*

Silently, the SeaWing got up and went over to his desk where he pulled out a file from the shelf. When he turned around he had a somber look on his face. Flame's stomach turned. *Oh shit. Now what?*

The Healer sat back down on his own cushion and spoke gently. "Now Flame, I know you probably won't want to talk about this, but both Queen Ruby and your mother wanted me to discuss this with you."

Flame perked and his heart began to pound. His mother? What did she want? Did she want him to come home yet? She hadn't replied to any of his letters yet but he assumed she was just busy. What could she possibly want Flame to talk to his Healer about?

But the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach gave him a good indication.

"It's about what you tried to do to Stonemover..."

A wave on nausea crashed over Flame and he felt his scales burn hot. His throat felt tight and dry as the guilt crawled its way up from his stomach and into his skull. It threatened to draw tears from his eyes and turn him a pathetic heap of regret. The sudden burst of guilt nearly made him choke. Ever since the Stonemover incident it had been getting worse and worse but this was the strongest reaction so far.

Flame took a shaky breath and tried to maintain his composure.

When it came to shame and sorrow Flame only knew one way to deal with it. Incinerate them with anger.

He felt his fury well up inside him and he let it. It filled every bone and muscle like lava flowing through the NightWing city.

Flame quickly rose to his feet, smoke billowing from his nose and mouth. He grabbed the file from Starfish and flung it across the room. "We're done here," he growled, low and deep. It wasn't just a statement, it was a warning. Flame bolted from the room. He slid the door open so fast that he heard the wood crack as it hit the frame but he didn't look back. Keeping his head down he stormed back to his room and locked the door behind him.

Once alone he fully let his rage out. First he sunk his claws into the nearby shelves and threw them to the ground, reveling as wood chips flew off before taking hold of the chair at the desk and flinging it against the wall, causing a leg to fly off. He grabbed the welcome package resting on the desk and threw it across the room, the various papers within flying out in all direction. Then came the desk. He tipped it over and it crashed to the floor, its wood splintering into a large scar.

All the while, Flame screamed in his head. *I hate this place! I hate Starfish! I hate Queen Ruby! JUST FUCK IT ALL!*

At length he stood there, panting, and observed the chaos he had caused.

It hadn't made him feel any better. Tears were slowing rolling down his face and he took several deep, shuddering breaths. It was only

late morning but Flame just wanted to crawl into back into bed and lie there until tomorrow morning. Flame rubbed his face, his talons automatically tracing the veiny paths of his scar as it weaved through his scales. He exhaled deeply.

I really screwed up everything up this time. I wonder what Starfish will say during tomorrow's session. Will I even get *another session?* Another wave of guilt washed over him and he shook his head. He needed a distraction.

He went over to his bag of graphicolls and took out the one he was currently reading. He would find a nice place in the gardens and get lost in the story. It's what he always did when he didn't want to face the reality of his anger.

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The garden air smelled of wild roses and newly bloomed lilacs. Flame followed his favourite trail through the grounds, passing beds of orange and red lilies, stalks of dahlias that were the size of Flame's talons and bloomed a rich pink and yellow, and bushes covered in sweet smelling golden flowers.

The path stopped at a giant fountain and forked to either side. Flame took the left path which lead to his favourite reading spot nestled under a large oak tree surrounded by a herb garden full of mint, rosemary and lavender. Flame's mind was finally starting to relax. When living with the Talon's of Peace he had never spent much time in gardens. Instead he was always kept inside, away from the war and away from his mother. That was another reason he liked cooking. It could be done indoors. This was the first real garden he had ever been in and he was finding that he actually liked them.

Flame laid down in a shady patch of long grass that was hidden from the mid-morning sun and opened his graphicoll. *Finally! Some peace and quiet.*

"Sora! I think the herb garden is over here!"

Oh shit.
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That was, without a doubt, Umber's voice. Flame flattened himself to the ground as he saw the galumphing figure of Umber through the branches of the lilac bush. The MudWing was turning his head in every direction.

He heard Umber sigh. "I swear it was around here somewhere..."

Another MudWing joined him and Flame knew it was Sora.

"Maybe we should have gone the other way," her timid voice suggested.

Yes. Go the other way and get the fuck out of here!

Unfortunately they didn't listen to Flame's silent advice.

"Hmmm..." Umber hummed. "No, I am SURE we went the right way. Let me just check behind these bushes..."

Oh for fuck's sake.

Umber's surprised face poked through a cluster of lilacs. "Flame!" He exclaimed with a genuine smile. The MudWing forced his body through the bush, causing branches full of flowers to tumble to the ground and leaving a gaping hole in the plant.

Flame sat up quickly and hid his graphicoll in the fold of his wing. He observed the broken branches with a grimace. *Is he too stupid to realize the mess he made or does he just not give a shit?*

Umber paid no attention to Flame's unwelcoming face and bound up to him. "Funny meeting you here. What's up?"

Flame hissed and ignored the question. "Why do you keep showing up wherever I am? Are you stalking me?"

Umber's ears twitched but his expression didn't change. "Uh, no. Sora and I were looking for the herb garden. We wanted to make some herbal teas." He looked to his sister and waved his wing as a signal for her to join. Her skittish brown eyes peered out from behind the leaves before she, too, stepped through the passage Umber had made in the bush, flinching as her talons snapped a

twig. When she saw Flame she hesitated, but when she looked at Umber she seemed to gather some courage and quickly to his side. She gave Flame a polite nod.

Flame hid the chill that ran up his spine. *I can't believe* this *is the dragon that blew up the school. She looks as brittle as a cobweb!*

"We were just going to collect some plants and make some tea. You are welcomed to join us!" Umber offered.

Flame wrinkled his snout. "Drinking warm water that tastes like plants? Not on your life."

This made Umber laugh for some reason. "Alright, suit yourself. So are we still meeting tonight to cook dinner?"

Flame adverted his gaze. He suddenly felt tired. All the anger from early that day had worn him out more that he realized. "I um...I don't think so. I'm just going to go to bed early tonight."

If Flame had wanted to get Umber off his case, that was the *wrong* thing to say. Umber's eyes narrowed slightly and he looked Flame over. Flame twitched uncomfortably. It was weird how fast Umber's eyes could go from blank and stupid to intelligent and deep.

"Is...something wrong?" Umber asked in a lowered voice, leaning his head in towards Flame.

Flame sat up straight and hid his exhaustion with a snarl. "No! Now why don't you just go away and LEAVE ME ALONE?" He yelled and evacuated the clearing. He heard the heavy steps of Umber following him.

"Flame! Wait up! Please, tell me what's wrong!"

Flame didn't stop but he did turn his head to yell back. "And why the *hell* do you care?"

Umber finally matched his pace with Flame's and walked beside him. "Because I'm your friend."

The SkyWing stopped in his tracks and Umber skidded to a halt

shortly after with a confused expression. Flame couldn't hold his fury back. It had been building all day and now it came pouring out.

He glared at Umber. "You're *not* my friend," he growled. "You're a stupid, annoying MudWing that ruins *everything* by sticking your fat nose where it doesn't belong and where is certainly isn't wanted. So why don't you follow the simple instructions I gave you on the first day and FUCK OFF!"

Umber stared at Flame, his forehead pinched in an expression of pain and confusion. Cold, heavy guilt settled in his stomach like a bolder but he ignored it.

Good. That ought to get this idiot off my case.

By now Sora had caught up to them and she loyally sidled up to Umber and looked at him with concern. Flame avoided Umber's eyes and turned around to leave only to run into a cold wall of white. Flame tumbled into a nearby shrub while the IceWing male he had just collided with was thrown off balance, wobbling slightly before righting himself.

Spitting out leaves Flame fought his way out of the bush. "Watch where you're going, shithead! You're lucky I don't light you on fire!" Flame hissed and stormed off.

"That's pretty bold talk for such a hideous faced idiot," the IceWing spoke. Flame halted and inhaled sharply. *Oh HELL no.*

He whipped around to face the dragon. "WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU JUST SAY?"

Sora was covering her head with her wings while Umber stepped between the two males. He had a terrified expression but he spoke calmly. "Ok, let's not let this get out of talon here-"

The IceWing, that was easily twice Flame's size, firmly pushed Umber aside with his wing.

"I *said* you're an ugly idiot." The IceWing stepped forward to glower down at Flame. "And while I'm at it I would also say you're pathetic.

Your whole tribe is. If it were up to me you would have all been killed in the war. The only good SkyWing is a dead one."

Smoke coiled from Flame's nostrils.

You're going to regret those words you piece of shit. Flame leapt at the IceWing with talons forward and fangs barred but his opponent was ready and easily swatted him out of the air and into a nearby rose bush. Splinters and thorns embedded themselves under his scales.

CRAP THAT HURTS! Flame heaved himself up and began pulling the sweet smelling flowers off his scales but he didn't have the time to finish. He rolled out of the way just as the IceWing landed hard on the spot of soil right were Flame had been. The ice dragon didn't miss a beat and quickly spun around to swipe at Flame with his serrated talons. Flame dodged the first one but the second swing nicked him on the snout and blood dripped out.

From the peripheral of his attention Flame noticed the commotion going on in the gardens as patients and staff alike cleared the area, but he couldn't dwell on it.

Acting on instinct Flame released a jet of fire at the IceWing. His opponent gasped and jumped out of the way just in time save his face from being incinerated but his wing tip received a direct hit. While roaring in pain Flame used this distraction to leap on top of the white dragon and clawed at his wings and back. Blue blood dripped out of the wounds and the IceWing flared his strong wings. Flame was flung off and he hit the ground hard but used the momentum to roll back on his talons.

But the IceWing was fast. A cold body slammed into him from behind and Flame was thrown against a tree. He fell to the ground, heaving for breath as the wind was knocked out of him.

The IceWing stood over him, panting slightly. "Like I said...pathetic."

He opened his mouth wide, ready to hit Flame with his frost-breath, but paused. He suddenly went rigid and then limp, falling to the ground in a heap of white scales. Protruding from his uninjured

wing was a dart.

On wobbling legs Flame rose and observed the object. *What the hell is that? It looks like something from the rain- OW!* A sharp pain hit his wing and he twisted around to see a dart was now sticking in him. He went to pull it out but his vision quickly became blurry and then went black.

Chapter 7

"What are you looking at?" Sora asked and handed Umber a cup of mint and rosemary tea. He was sprawled on his bed focusing intently a scroll but quickly sat up on his haunches to receive the small cup. As he took the tea he passed Sora the item he was looking at.

"I don't know. Flame dropped in during the fight yesterday. I thought it was just a scroll but I opened it up and it's full of pictures!"

Sora set her own cup down on the nightstand and plopped down on her own bed which was right next to his. She opened the scroll and inspected it with an intrigued expression. "You're right. There are TONS of pictures." She paused for a moment and Umber could see her eyes scanning the paper as she read the bits of text that accompanied each image. Umber sipped his tea to hide his frustration. *I should have practiced my reading more. I* really *want to know what's going on in that scroll.*

Sora finally looked up. "There seems to be a story and plot connected with the pictures," she noted and smiled gently. "The artwork is nice."

Umber perked. "So it is a story! What's it about?"

His sister shrugged and Umber hid his disappointment with another sip of tea. Any other time he would have just asked Flame, but now...

Flame's cruel words had been running through his head since yesterday. Umber had felt something was off as soon as Flame said he didn't want to cook. Maybe he shouldn't have pushed him to share. He should have just walked away and let Flame deal with whatever was bothering him in his own way. BUT NOPE. He had done the stupid thing and chased after him.

Umber sighed. He didn't know why it was bothering him. It's not like Flame hadn't said awful things to him before.

He must have let his hurt slip through since Sora quietly got up and sat next to him. Her eyes were warm and concerned. "You're thinking about Flame again aren't you?"

Umber had been trying to keep his hurt feelings to himself. He didn't want Sora worrying about him, but now that it was out in the open there was no stopping his rambling. He let it all out.

"I...I don't know." His shoulders sagged. "I guess I thought we were friends. We've been cooking together for a week and *I* thought we were having fun together." Umber recalled the afternoons spent with the angry SkyWing. As the week had progressed Umber was pleased to find Flame started to insult him less and actually even complimented him once! Well, he supposed many dragons wouldn't consider "*Wow, you actually didn't burn anything this time!"* to be a compliment but Umber would happily accept any kind words from the angry red dragon.

He felt Sora's tail wrap around his own and she leaned her head against his. "I'm sorry things didn't work out. I know you were excited to have him as a friend."

Umber rubbed his face and exhaled a deep breath. "I guess I just feel stupid. I knew something was bothering him and I thought I was helping but...I guess not."

Sora squeezed his tail. "You're not stupid, Umber. You're the most observant and kindest dragon I know. You were just trying to help and he just wasn't ready to accept it. You just have to be more patient with him." She gave her characteristic timid smile and it warmed Umber's heart.

"Yeah...maybe I should go and talk to him," Umber thought aloud but the notion chilled him. The last time he had seen Flame he had been talon-to-talon with a huge IceWing. He could just imagine how furious Flame would be today, stalking around his room cussing up a storm. Even though he dreaded seeing Flame like that, Umber had to admit he was worried.

OK, I'll go and visit him today and return his scroll...maybe if he's not too angry he'll tell me what it's about!

Sora and Umber finished drinking their tea until it was time for Sora to go to her appointment. Umber offered to walk her there and then would visit Flame afterwards. Before leaving their room Sora grabbed a little knapsack full of scrolls.

Sora noticed Umber's questioning gaze and answered his unspoked question. "Jet recommended them to me." She smiled shyly. "She liked to read too, but..." she trailed off and nervously added. "I mean, they're good stories! But Jet likes to read scary things and well...they scare me a little." She gave a helpless shrug accompanied by a lopsided smile.

Umber laughed. "You don't HAVE to read them, Sora. I'm sure Jet has other recommendations."

Sora laughed as well. "Maybe I'll ask her if she has any less scary stories and I can work up to the more serious ones."

They walked in silence for a bit. They took their usual shortcut through the gardens and stopped every once in a while to admire some exotic flower. Well, exotic by their standards.

"Do you think you could make tea out of this?" Umber asked as he touched the orange and black flowers that were attached to vine crawling up a tree. Sora leaned in to smell the flower and smiled.

"I could try and find a book of teas at the library. Maybe it would tell us which plants are OK to use."

Umber couldn't help but notice Sora was smiling more. He told her this and she gave a self-conscious grin and shrugged.

"I have been feeling better since I got here. Zephyr is super nice, and I like spending time with Jet," she spoke as they continued to walk.

Umber nodded. "Yeah, you and Jet get along pretty great! I'm glad to see you're making friends." He nudged his sister and she agreed.

"Yeah, other than our sib group I never really had any other friends." Sora noted with a twinge of sadness. "And of course, at Jade Academy I had some friends but then I...then I ruined everything..." Her sentence trailed off and the smile dropped from her face. She suddenly seemed lost in thought as a pain expression took over her features.

Umber stopped walking, frantic to reverse whatever thought process was now occurring in his sister's head. "No, Sora, you mustn't think like that! It wasn't...I know you didn't mean to..." Umber didn't really know what to say so instead he just wrapped his wings around his sister. He just wished he could protect her from all the guilt and pain she was going through, but all that came from within. All he could do right now was offer his love and support.

They sibs hugged in the garden for a few moments before Sora gently unraveled herself from Umber. A few tears were streaming down her face and she wiped them away. Umber did his best to console her.

"Just...try not to think about it, Sora."

Sora took a few shaky breaths and lifted her chin to meet his eyes. "No Umber. I won't do that anymore. I have to face what I did. Even if it is horrible I can't run away from it." She took another deep breath. "Zephyr has been helping me a lot though... I am really glad we came here." A small grin tugged on her mouth and she seemed to be coming out of whatever guilt-full haze she has just been in. Umber returned her smile with his own.

"Me too. I just want you to be happy, Sora."

They hugged once more and then continued on their way. Zephyr was already waiting for Sora when they arrived so Umber gave a quick farewell. As the office door shut in front of him he let out a sigh. It was time to visit Flame.

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Umber knew Flame was in the west-most building but he had no
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idea which room. He meandered about the lounging area in the center of the building to see if Flame was sitting around.

Umber *did* spot some angry SkyWings mucking about but none of them were Flame. Umber continued to look about until he noticed a SandWing observing him. She was just sitting outside of a room, watching him with wary eyes. She had some sort of satchel strapped across her chest and when Umber accidentally met her gaze he quickly turned away and decided to look elsewhere.

Maybe he's reading in the garden? Umber thought and made his way towards the large archway that took him towards the cafeteria. As he was about to leave a frantic SeaWing whipped by him and nearly knocked him over. The SeaWing halted and quickly turned to Umber.

"Oh! Umber! I didn't realize it was you. I'm so sorry for running into you!" The SeaWing spoke in shallow pants.

Umber finally recognized him as Starfish, Flame's Healer. "It's fine, really! But what's the emergency?" Umber furrowed his brow in concern. "Is something the matter? Do you need any help?"

Starfish fidgeted and rubbed his neck awkwardly. "Well...I had just arrived in my office this morning and Zephyr came by to tell me what happened to Flame yesterday so I came as soon as I could," he sputtered out and then let out a deep sigh, his shoulders sagging. "This is all my fault. Yesterday I brought up something...."

Umber tried to hide his interest. What *had* made Flame so upset yesterday? He eagerly waited for Starfish to finish his sentence but the SeaWing simply sighed again.

"Anyway, I should be off." Starfish turned to walk away but paused. "Hey, Umber...would you be interested in coming with me?"

Umber blinked. "Uh, you want me to go with you?"

The SeaWing nodded. "You're Flame's friend, I think it would make him feel better to have you there."

Umber hid a grimace. *I don't think Flame would agree with* that

assessment, Umber thought but kept it to himself. *Buuuut I* did *want to visit him today. And this will probably be my only chance since I have NO idea which room is his.*

Finally Umber agreed and followed Starfish as they approached the door...with the strange SandWing standing in front of it. *Uhh...that's not a good sign.*

The SandWing was taller than Starfish and wore an unreadable face which was neither hostile nor welcoming.

Starfish beamed up at her like she were any other dragon. "Hello, you must be Ibis. You are Flame's guard, correct?"

Umber jolted. *A guard? How much trouble is Flame in?* He gulped.

Ibis nodded slowly. "Yes. I am the one who darted him yesterday and brought him back to his room," she answered passively.

"You *darted* him?" Umber blurted out in shock. He had actually not been there to see how the fight had ended. Everyone had been forced to clear out of the gardens.

"Well yeah," Ibis said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "It's protocol. If any fights brake out we're supposed to dart them."

Umber cocked his head in confusion. "Why would there be fighting? This is a hospital!"

A flicker of amusement passed across her features. "Look, kid. This place has veterans from ALL sides of the war. There's BOUND to be some fighting."

Umber blushed in embarrassment. "Oh. Right." To him the war seemed distant, like some sort of horrible nightmare that he could never fully remember. But he supposed it was not that way for others.

Starfish impatiently spoke up. "Well, thank you for your help but I would like to see my patient now. I am Starfish, his Soul Healer."

Ibis nodded. "Dr. Zephyr said you would show up." She stepped aside and let Starfish pass but stopped Umber with an outstretched wing.

"Oh, he's with me!" Starfish quickly offered. Ibid raised a brow at Umber but let the two dragons pass and followed them into the room.

The first thing Umber noticed was...nothing. The room was almost completely dark. The heavy curtains where thrown over the window, blocking out the mid-morning sun. A sudden light went on beside Umber and he flinched only to realize it was Starfish using his glow scales. The SeaWing made his way through the room, avoiding various objects that were strewn over the floor. Only when Starfish threw open the blinds that Umber could see the chaos that surrounded them.

His jaw fell open at the sight of the splintered shelves and desk and the broken chair near the wall. Starfish was taken aback as well.

"The place was like this when I brought him back yesterday," Ibis told them.

Umber heard Starfish utter something under his breath that sounded like 'oh dear'.

Oh dear is right. What happened here? Is Flame alright?

A low groan from his left gave Umber his answer. Umber had expected to see the young SkyWing stomping back and forth, spitting with fury. But instead he was just lying in bed with his wings thrown over his head.

Slowly Flame untangled himself just enough to uncover his mouth. "I really fucked up this time, didn't I?" He asked in a limp tone. "Are they gonna kick me out?" Flame raised his head to face Starfish and Umber saw that his eyes were red and puffy.

"No, of course not! You will always have a place here." The Healer carefully approached the bed and sat down next to it. "Flame, I just wanted to say how *terribly* sorry I am. This is all my doing. I should

have *never* forced you to talk about something you weren't ready for." Starfish hung his head in shame. "I only hope that you can forgive me and be willing to remain as my patient."

Umber held his breath as he waited for Flame's reply. The SkyWing stared at Starfish for several moments before answering. "I could literally care less about what the hell happens in this shitty place. So it doesn't matter who is my stupid Soul Healer because I will hate them all equally!"

Flame angrily buried his head under his wings again. The once sorrowful waves the rolled off the SkyWing were turning into burst of fury. Umber cast a sympathetic gaze and Starfish.

"I see," Starfish said flatly. "Perhaps we shall discuss it more later." The Healer was silent for a moment. "I will have to write a letter to Queen Ruby...and your mother."

Flame seemed to curl up even tighter at the mention of his mother.

"Also," the SeaWing continued. "Ibis here will be supervising you." He motioned to the SandWing who had been sitting awkwardly in the room with them. "She will be with you for at least a week. After the week is over she will decide if you need further supervision or not."

Starfish waited for a response but there was none. He let out a sight and left the bedside, slowly making his way over to the tipped desk. Umber watched as the SeaWing began to clean up the room, starting with the fallen over desk and scattered papers.

Umber's wings wilted. *Poor Starfish. He just wants to help. It must be hard having Flame as a patient.*

Umber was about to get up and help when he heard Flame clearing his throat. He turned to see the SkyWing staring at him with narrowed eyes.

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?"

Chapter 8

"Well?" Flame asked impatiently. Umber swallowed hard and finally sputtered out an answer.

"I was worried about you." He hesitated. "So I decided to come and see if you were alright." The sheepish smile Umber flashed him made Flame's ear twitch and he snorted.

What a fucking lie.

"Yeah, right. What's the *real* reason you're here?" Flame snapped and Umber stared at him like a dull sheep.

"I-uh, that's my reason," the MudWing spoke with a wary tone. Flame growled.

Liar.

Everyone's a fucking liar. Stonemover, Marrowseer....actually all NightWings would go onto that list BUT MY POINT IS STILL VALID. Everyone's an asshole and that's life.

Flame sat up in his bed and looked down at Umber. Smoke coiled from his nostrils and he noticed Umber tucking his wings in close. When Flame spoke it was in a low growl.

"Don't lie to me, MudWing. Don't *pretend* you care. I know you hate me. I know you FEAR me. The only reason you help me in the kitchen is because it's related to food. So answer the question. Why. Are. You. Fucking. Here?"

"Uh, well, I..." Umber struggled to find his words and Flame enjoyed watching the MudWing squirm.

"Jeez, leave the kid alone would ya?" The stupid SandWing that was supposed to be guarding Flame spoke up.

Flame sent a hiss her way. "Stay out of this, sand-snorter." He leapt from the bed and jumped in beside Umber. "And who the hell invited you in here?" he asked the SandWing. "Get out of my fucking room!"

With a dark expression the SandWing nodded and left, leaving Flame, Umber, and Starfish alone. Starfish was currently trying to figure out how to put the leg back onto the chair and Umber was watching the SandWing leave warily.

Flame turned to Umber. "That goes for you as well. Get. Out."

Umber jolted. "Oh. Right. Sure...." he trailed off and Flame turned away to crawl back into bed. All he wanted to do was curl up and be left alone. Why did everybody suddenly decide to barge in like it was some sort of party? *Assholes. Can't they see I just want to be left alone?*

Umber headed for the door then paused. "Oh wait! I have something of yours!" he chirped and pulled something out from under his wing. Flame rolled his eyes and looked over but gasped slightly when he saw what the MudWing was carrying.

"My graphicoll! What the hell, Umber? Did you steal it?" He leaped forward and snatched the scroll from Umber.

"I didn't take it! You dropped it during the fight." Umber quickly answered but Flame ignored him. He made his way over to the window and examined the graphicoll in the light. There were some dirt smudges but other than that everything was intact. Flame sighed in relief.

"So what is it?" Umber's voice suddenly appeared right behind him and Flame jumped.

Flame tucked the graphicoll away under his wing, feeling embarrassed and a little self-conscious. In the past, anytime he had brought up his graphicolls he had either been mocked or the other dragon had shown no interest what-so-ever.

"It's nothing. Now didn't I tell you to leave?"

By now Starfish was listening in to the conversation with interest. "Is that one of those...oh what did you call them....*grapolls* that you are always are reading?" Starfish asked. Flame ground his teeth together.

"They're called *graphicolls*...and yes." Flame's answer was curt and he had hoped that the conversation would end there. His hopes were, yet again, dashed by Umber and his stupid face.

Umber stared at him with wide eyes that sparkled with curiosity. "What's a graphicoll?"

Flame rubbed his neck. "Well, it's like a normal scroll...with more pictures...and badass superheroes."

The MudWing's eyes someone grew even wider. "Whoa! What's a *superhero*? They sound like a hero but better."

Flame snorted. "Of *course* they're better! Because they have actual powers that they can use whenever they want and they use them to save the world!"

Umber tilted his head in confusion. "So they are like animus dragons?"

"What? No!" Flame snapped. "They're way cooler than those shitty animus dragons! Superheroes are hatched with these specific powers, they can't just magic away their problems and that's what makes it interesting. They have to work together and use their powers wisely to fight off the supervillains."

Umber blinked rapidly several times. "Did you say...super*villains*?"

"Oh yes." Flame nodded and opened up the graphicoll to show Umber one of the scenes. "See that guy?" He pointed to a picture of a somber looking dragon wearing a dramatic cape. "That's Lord Evil and he wants to destroy the world! And then *these* dragons..." Flame scanned through the story to find the scene he was looking for which showed a group of heroic looking dragons. "...are the good guys." He turned the graphicoll towards Umber to show him. The MudWing gazed intently at the picture. Despite himself Flame could

NOT shut up. He wanted so badly for Umber to just leave, but this was the first time someone had actually shown any interest in his graphicolls and, as hard as he tried, he couldn't curb his enthusiasm.

"So...do they defeat Lord Evil?" Umber questioned as his eyes flickered across the pictures in the scroll. Flame frowned.

"I'm no spoil-sport. If you want to find out what happens then you'll have to read it yourself." He snapped the graphicoll shut and walked over to his bag where he carefully stuffed it in with the rest of his collection.

He turned back and felt a little guilty about the disheartened expression of Umber's face.

"Oh...OK," Umber resigned.

Flame tried to push aside this new, blobby feeling inside of him. *Who gives a fuck what Umber feels? He's just a stupid, annoying MudWing. Why should I care?*

The MudWing shuffled his talons awkwardly. "Well, I guess I should be going...see you around, Flame."

Flame heard Umber's talons clink against the floor as he made for the exit.

"Umber, wait," Flame quickly called out and he heard Umber halt. *What the fuck am I doing?*

"Did you want to...borrow my graphicolls to read?" Flame offered. *WHAT THE FUCK AM I DOING? Am I that desperate to have someone I can talk to about graphicolls that I am willing to lend a MUDWING my pristine collection?*

But the way Umber's eyes lit up made that gross, blobby feeling go away.

"Really? You would let me take them?" Umber bound over to where Flame was rooting through his bag to find the first few issues of the series he was reading. He found the ones he was looking for and

passed them to Umber, but just as the MudWing reached to grab then, Flame snatched onto Umber's wrist and pulled their faces close.

"Listen carefully, MudWing," Flame hissed. "Any damage that happens to these scrolls I will do to you. Got it?"

Umber gulped and nodded. Flame passed him the gaphicolls and released Umber's wrist. He ignored Starfish's proud smile from the corner of his eye as he watched Umber leave. But yet again, Umber paused at the door.

"Oh for fuck's sake, now what?" Flame moaned and glared at Umber. He was somewhat taken aback by the tender and intelligent glint in the MudWing's eyes.

"Listen, Flame," Umber began, meeting his eyes. "I know you don't think of me as a friend, but if you ever need one...well, you know where to find me. And for the record, I don't hate you."

A weird, warm feeling spread through Flame and he stifled a small smile. "Would you just *leave* already?" he barked. Umber nodded and turned to leave, only to boop his snout against Ibis' chest. She had slid open the door and searched around the room until she met Starfish's eyes.

"There's an agitated SkyWing out here. Did you want me to send her in?" The SandWing ask and an offended snort sounded behind her.

"I'm not agitated! I have an urgent message!"

Flame grimaced. He recognized that voice. It was that annoying SkyWing that ran the front desk. Her pink and orange head popped out from underneath Ibis' wings and she tried to push past the SandWing. "Umber! I didn't expect to see you here. How's Sora?"

Umber smiled but Flame noticed how it didn't quite reach his eyes. "She's doing better. She and Zephyr are together right now."

Starfish finally noticed the commotion and told Ibis is was alright for Jet to come in.

Right, like MY permission doesn't matter. It's my room! Flame fumed but kept silent. No one was even listening to him anyway.

Jet gave a nod of thanks to Starfish and spoke, "The head chef came down with the stomach flu and can't come in tonight, but he said to get the angry guy to fill in for him, the one that's been volunteering for a while."

Angry guy? Who the hell is that? But Flame got his answer when he realized everyone was staring at him. *Well fuck you all as well!*

"Also..." Jet added sheepishly. "He kind of called in sick on short notice so...you only have an hour to prepare a meal for 100 dragons."

"WHAT?" Flame roared. "You didn't think to come SOONER?"

Jet stomped her foot. "I SAID it was short notice!"

"Well, Flame? Do you feel up to it?" Starfish asked. Four sets of eyes lingered on him and Flame hid his nervousness with a grimace. He was still feeling pretty shitty, but he did feel better now for some reason. Maybe talking about graphicolls had given him the distraction he needed.

And cooking always did make him feel better.

Flame growled. "Fine, I'll do it. But only on ONE condition...everyone gets the FUCK out of my room pronto."

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Quickly Flame washed his talons and put on an apron that hung over his chest and contained multiple pockets. Meanwhile Umber toddled behind him, copying his actions until they were both ready to cook.

"OK, so," Flame began to explain the plan. "We're making grilled salmon with a maple glaze, spiced rice and we'll add some steamed asparagus or something to it." He spoke while flinging open every cupboard and pulling out the ingredients. Umber nodded with determination.
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"Yes, good plan! What do you want me to do?"

As annoying as Umber was, at least he had the sense to listen to Flame in the kitchen.

"Go and get the salmon in the cellar. I am going to get the rice boiling-HEY WATCH IT!" Flame bumped into Ibis who had insisted on coming along. However, all she was going right now was getting in the way.

"If you're just going to get in my way then go guard outside!" Flame snapped and pushed past her to reach the stove top. He lit the fire below and gathered several large pots with lids. He poured water into them and then the rice. As he waited for the water to boil he went to the large stone oven and lit the fire there as well. He needed to get it hot, and soon. He only had about 40 minutes now.

Flame put the attachable grill into the oven and waited for Umber to come back with the fish. *OK, everything is fine. I got this!*

Umber finally arrived. He had to make a few trips to get all the required servings but Flame didn't wait. He grabbed the fillet knife and began cutting up the fishes and deboning them. He was on the fifth fish when he remembered. *OH SHIT! THE ASPARAGUS!*

In the moment his focus was broke the knife slipped and cut him across the palm. "FUCK." He immediately withdrew his talons to prevent the blood from dripping onto the fish. He was applying pressure to the cut just as Umber walked in with the last load of fish. The MudWing's reaction was immediate.

"Flame, what happened?" He asked while taking a clean cloth from the counter. He grabbed Flame's wrist without warning and pressed the cloth against the wound. Flame winced but didn't pull away.

Umber turned to Ibis who was standing in the corner of the kitchen, out of the way. "Would you please go and get a bandage from the clinic?" he asked. Ibis hesitated and glanced warily at Flame who scowled as best he could.

Finally she sighed. "Fine. I'll be back shortly." She then fixed Flame

with a stern look. "Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone."

Flame was about to give his own retort when Umber stepped on his tail to silence him. As soon as Ibis was gone the MudWing spoke. "You really shouldn't be making an enemy out of her."

Flame snorted. "Everyone already hates me as soon as they see me. What's the point in trying to change their minds?"

Umber furrowed his brow at Flame's words but kept silent for a moment, busying himself by checking to see if the cut was still bleeding. It was. Umber continued to press against the injury. "What do you mean by that?" he abruptly asked. "Why would someone hate you as soon as they saw you?"

Using his good talon Flame pointed to his scar. "Everybody hates ugly things. It's a fact of life. Ugly things get thrown away, destroyed, left behind, and replaced with pretty things. No one wants a deformed flower or chair...or dragonet." Flame swallowed hard. This was getting to close to home. Perhaps Umber picked up on this because he didn't ask any further questions but began to blush slightly.

"Why are you blushing?" Flame hissed. "Is something funny to you?"

"What? Oh, no, it's not that...just..." Umber seemed embarrassed and he looked at his feet. "I don't think your scar is ugly...I think it looks...cool."

Flame nearly staggered back. His mouth fell open but no words came out. At least not at first. "You...you think it's *cool*? You think this fucking abomination on my face is *cool*?"

Umber shrugged and looked up at Flame nervously. "Everyone has scars now. Just look around at the other patients here. Even I have scars!" Umber paused. "I think they're cool, they make a dragon look tough ya know? Like, each one tells a story."

Flame considered this. It didn't change the fact that he hated his scar...but maybe he had been wrong to think that *everyone* hated it. *But why would my mother have sent me away if she didn't think I was*

disgusting? Maybe not everyone hates it but she sure does.

At the thought of his mother another wave of guilt hit him. She would be receiving a letter soon describing what he had done yesterday. She would be so disappointed in him...again.

"Uh oh. You have that look on your face again," Umber spoke and Flame straightened up.

"What's that supposed to mean? I don't have a strange look on my face...YOU'RE THE ONE WITH THE STRANGE FACE." Flame pulled his talon away. It had stopped bleeding but still stung.

He turned his gaze back to the MudWing he could see a pained expression on his face. "Sora has the same look when she thinks about..." he trailed off leaving Flame to fill in the blanks. The two sat in silence awkward silence for some time until Ibis returned moments later.

"I have the things!" she announced and passed a roll of bandages and some ointment to Umber. Still in silence Umber wrapped Flame's wound securely. Flame nodded his thanks and in a series of awkward nods and mumbles they finally went their separate ways and busied themselves by finishing the meal.

Flame worked effortlessly, but his mind kept going over what Umber had said. From what he could tell Umber had appeared to be telling the truth. Did he really think Flame's scar was cool?

Hmm. Flame thought as he watched Umber from the corner of his eye. *Maybe I CAN trust him.*

Chapter 9

Flame and Umber collapsed onto a heap on the floor. They had done it. They had fed all the patients by working non-stop and making a complete mess of the kitchen. Usually Flame liked to clean up as he went along, but there had been no time. Fish scales coated everything, grains of rice were stuck all over his body and the counters were dirtier than the floor.

But perhaps the most surprising thing was that, despite not having time to eat, Umber hadn't even complained.

"Uhhh," Umber groaned on the floor. "I am so hungry."

Never mind.

"There might be some food left...somewhere," Flame offered unhelpfully. He really had no idea what was going on anymore.

"Well actually..." Umber spoke sheepishly. "You were kinda flying around the kitchen like a crazy guy so while you were busy I tucked away some food for us." Umber lumbered to his feet and basically crawled over to the dimming stove and pulled out two salmon. They were not cut up or anything, but they had been cooked all the way through and smelled great.

What the hell? How did I not notice two extra salmon in the stove? Flame questions but when he tried to recall the last hour it was just one giant blur. Instead he just weakly accepted the food Umber offered him and the two ate in silence until the kitchen door was slid open.

In came Sora and Jet.

"Holy blazes, it looks like murder scene in here!" Jet exclaimed.

"Umber? Are you in here?" Sora's quieter voice asked. Both Umber

and Flame groaned to alert the others that they were lying behind the set out counters in the center of the kitchen. Soon enough they were found.

"Oh my gosh! Umber! Are you alright?" Sora ran up to her brother and helped him to his feet.

Umber gave a weak laugh. "We're fine. Just exhausted."

"Hey. Get up," Jet said to Flame while poking him in the foot with her tail. Flame didn't even have the energy to growl. Luckily Umber helped Flame onto his wobbly talons so he could properly see the chaos around them.

"Fuck. This is going to take forever to clean up." Flame rubbed his face in exhaustion but immediately regretted it as the fish scales that were once all over his talons were now all over his face. *Fuck my life.*

"Maybe not," Jet spoke and nudged Sora. "I'm sure if all four of us worked together it would be clean in no time!"

Even though it made his scales twitch to be in the presence of the loud female SkyWing and the brittle and possibly crazy sister of Umber, Flame knew better than to refuse their help.

"OK. Fine. Let's just get this cleaned up so I can go to bed," Flame growled.

Umber gave him a strange look. "But it's only a little after noontime. We just served lunch!"

"Do I look like I fucking care, Umber?"

"Wow, this is such a super fun friendship group. I can't wait to spend the rest of the afternoon cleaning with you all," Jet said with mock enthusiasm and Flame snorted at her.

What a cheeky piece of shit. He thought and with the diplomatic abilities of Umber they were able to split the tasks up. Flame grabbed the broom and began sweeping while Umber clean out the ashes in the stove and the two girls washed the pots, pans and

grills.

While Flame and Umber worked in silence, Sora and Jet would NOT shut up. To make things INFINETILY worse, they were talking about the most stupid stuff.

"So have you actually SEEN the ghost?" Sora urgently asked Jet who gave a vague answer.

"Well no, not exactly BUT I know for a fact that she's there! I have collected the testimony of several guards and..."

"What the fuck are you two talking about?" Flame interrupted and leaned against the broom. Jet whipped around to fix him with her orange eyes.

"Mind your own business, I wasn't talking to you!" she retorted but Sora didn't seem to get the hint and answered.

"Jet thinks there's a ghost in the palace," she spoke with more excitement than Flame had ever heard from her.

"Oh, there is WAY more than just ONE ghost in the palace, but I was just telling Sora of a new one I found," Jet quickly added.

"Pfft." Flame let out a harsh laugh. "That's so stupid! There's no such thing as ghosts."

Jet had now turned around completely to face Flame. "Actually I have evidence that they do. I *am* an amateur ghost hunter after all." She puffed out her chest like it was something to be proud of. Meanwhile Sora was gazing up at Jet like she was some sort of superhero.

"Wow, I bet that's just as dumb as it sounds," Flame droned and was pleased when Jet let out a low growl.

"AHEM!" Ibis cleared her throat loudly and gave Flame and Jet a stern look. The SandWing was sitting in the corner reading a scroll. She had not offered to help clean.

Sora placed a talon on Jet's shoulder and the two got back to

cleaning. Flame decided to go sweep near the oven where Umber was.

"Can you believe those two?" Flame demanded as he got within earshot of the MudWing. "Going on about ghosts and other bullshit."

Umber lifted his ash coated head out of the oven and looked to Flame before shifting his gaze towards Sora. A small smile spread on his face.

"I could care less what she's interested in. As long as she's happy."

Flame blinked, slightly taken aback as a weird, warm feeling spread in his chest. *Holy crap this guy is nice...it's gross.* "Jeez Umber, I didn't know you were such a big sap. How the hell did you survive the war by being so NICE?"

Umber blushed and let out a breathy laugh. "I really have no idea. I always had my sibs to watch my back so...I guess it's easier to hold onto hope when you have love close by."

Flame made a gagging sound and Umber laughed.

"OK. Yeah, that was pretty sappy," the MudWing agreed. "But I guess what I am trying to say is that you have to have faith in other dragons. In their goodness."

Once again Umber had struck Flame. He squinted and regarded the MudWing with new eyes. Just by looking at him Flame didn't think Umber was a fighter. He smiled too much, hummed while he worked, and was always thinking of others. How could someone who had fought in a war and killed, who had watched countless tribe-mates murdered, still innately think that dragons were good while at the same time you had dragons like Flame: dragons that had been protected from the war but could only see hatred in others.

It's easier to hold onto hope when you have love close by, Flame repeated in his head. *Well maybe that's my problem. Mother was hardly around. It's not like I had much love in my life.*

I wonder what I would have been like if I had had someone around to

love me.

"I wish I could be more like you, Umber," Flame whispered and looked to the floor. He twisted the broom handle in his talons. "I wish I wasn't so angry all the time." *It has done nothing but cause me trouble. But it's all I know.*

Umber was staring at him now with his deep brown eyes and Flame finally noticed the golden flecks that spiralled around his iris. They flickered like fire, their warmth drawing Flame in.

"I know it's not easy for you either," Umber murmured and Flame was snapped out of his trance. "But I think it was really brave of you to come to the Healing Center in the first place to overcome whatever is bothering you."

Flame scoffed. "My mother made me come, actually."

Umber gave him a friendly nudge with his wing. "But you still CAME didn't you? That has to count for something!"

Flame shrugged but a small smile creeped onto the SkyWing's mouth. "Maybe," he agreed and the two dragons got back to cleaning.

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They finished the cleaning in under an hour. Flame had managed to regain some energy despite the brutal few days he was having. The group of five walked loosely together with Jet and Sora in the front and Umber trailing behind with Flame. Finally, Ibis was walking behind the entire group.

From what he had gathered from the excited chatter of Jet, the group was going back to Sora and Umber's room for tea. Flame, however, was determined to crawl back into bed. Umber looked ready for a nap as well but appeared to be pushing though his exhaustion.

"You are always welcomed to join us," Umber said for the tenth time.
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"Ugh. I keep telling you! Hot leaf juice is not my thing."

"Alright, I was just making sure." The two walked in silence for a little while longer until they approached the west-most building. *FINALLY. Soon I can just lie in bed and forget about everything.* Flame nodded a farewell to Umber before veering off to head back to his room.

Flame was therefore quite confused when Umber shouted a farewell to the others and ran up to join him.

"What gives? You better not think you're coming to my room to hang out."

"I left the graphicolls there. The one's you let me borrow," Umber reminded hesitantly, unsure whether Flame would still agree to their arrangement.

"Oh. Right. Fine, just don't stick around too long."

The MudWing nodded and the two walked together. Discretely Flame watched Umber as they walked through the gardens towards his room. Umber was smiling of course, his intelligent eyes jumped about observing the birds and flowers that filled the gardens. Flame quickly turned away when Umber noticed him staring. *What the fuck is wrong with me? I must be tired or something.*

When they reached their destination Flame unlocked the door and found Umber's bag of graphicolls on the small table in the sitting area. Umber took them in his talons and hugged them close.

"I can't wait to start reading these!" he confided, his eyes wild with excitement. "Then I will finally be able to talk to you about them."

Flame had to admit he was a little excited as well. "Yeah. I would like that too."

Umber would be the first dragon he had ever been able to share this interest with. Flame wrinkled his forehead as a thought struck him. *Does that make Umber my friend?*

If so, it would certainly be a first for that as well.

"So...Umber," Flame began, picking at a loose scale on his tail. "What you said before...about...well...when you said you thought of me as a friend...did you mean it?"

Umber blinked. "Of course I did!" His voice had a stern tone to it.

"And when you said my scar was cool...did you mean that too?"

Umber blushed but the fierce glint in his eyes stayed. "Yes. I meant that as well."

"Oh. Good," was the only thing Flame could respond with as a strange warmth crept along his face. They remained silent for a few moments while Flame was lost in thought.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have Umber as a friend...he gets on my nerves sometimes but then again everybody does.

Flame took a breath. "Well I was thinking that...I mean...well...from MY point of view, I wouldn't mind have you as a friend either." Flame's voice was quiet and he pretended to be more interested in the loose scale on his tail.

Umber jolted and gave Flame a wide grin. "Really? You want to be friends?" His voice bubbled with equal parts disbelief and joy.

"Yes. But on ONE condition." Flame stood before Umber and locked eyes with him. "You can't EVER lie to me. I hate liars and if I find out you lied to me I will hate you too."

"Oh." Umber gulped and tucked his wings in tight. Flame's stomach did an anxious flip as Umber turned away, obviously avoiding his gaze. The MudWing started nervously pulling at the straps on his knapsack. Finally he sighed.

"Then I guess I will have to tell you the truth."

Flame's eyes widened and his heart quickened. *Umber has been lying to me about something? I thought I could trust him! What the fuck, Umber?*

"What is it?" Flame hissed when Umber was taking too long.

Umber stuttered to answer. "It's nothing bad...I promise! It's just....I can't read," the MudWing admitted and stared at the floor with a forlorn expression.

Meanwhile Flame gawked at him. "That's it?" he breathed. "That's the secret you were keeping? I thought it was going to be something SERIOUS!" *That's hardly a secret anyway. I would have been more surprised if he HAD of known how to read.*

Umber turned his eyes upwards and raised a brow. "So...you're not angry? I thought you would be upset because I asked to borrow your graphicolls and can't read them."

Flame snorted. "I'm not mad. But it was a pretty dumb plan on your part."

Umber shrugged and gave a lopsided smile. He took out one of the graphicolls and opened them to a random place. "I was hoping maybe Sora could help me read them but she's been pretty busy." He sighed and put the scroll down. "But I am sure I could do it on my own! I know a few words so I could just...guess the rest?"

Flame let out a loud groan. What was the point in having a friend that couldn't even read the graphicolls you lent them?

"For fuck's sake. How about *I* teach you how to read them?" Flame offered and was properly offended by Umber's skeptical expression. "You have a problem with my teaching?" Flame snarled. Umber stumbled back and frantically shook his head.

"No. Of course not. Well, actually, I have no idea what you are like as a teacher," he admitted and sat down on one of the large floor cushions that had come with the room.

Flame sat down across from Umber and folded his arms over his chest. He threw Umber a hard look. "I'll have you know I am a GREAT teacher. I taught myself to cook, didn't I?"

Umber folded his own arms and hit Flame with an equally hard look. "Teaching *yourself* doesn't really count."

"Screw you! It does so!" Flame stood up and went toward the desk

where he grabbed the bad of graphicolls lying on the floor. He would have to sleep later. Right now he had to defend his honor.

"Let's go, MudWing," Flame ordered as he headed for the door.

Umber furrowed his brow and remained seated, but when he realized Flame was leaving him he scrambled to collect his things. "Where are we going?" he called as he rushed to catch up with Flame, his brown wings fluttering with anticipation.

"We're going to the library. Lesson one starts today."

Chapter 10

They decided the library wasn't going to be the best place to teach so instead they went to the garden, which was more than OK with Umber. Libraries were stuffy and everyone had to be quiet. Not to mention you weren't allowed food so, really, what was the point?

The gardens were vast and serene. They helped calm Umber's nerves. Particularly his anxiety about this whole *Flame teaching Umber to read* situation. Of course, Umber was ECSTATIC that Flame had wanted to be his friend...but the SkyWing wasn't all that patient...or gentle...and he yelled a lot.

Either way, this would be a learning experience for both of them.

Ibis was with them of course, but she stayed at a respectable distance. Luckily she wasn't required to shadow Flame, rather, she really just had to be able to see him at all times. And so, when Umber and Flame reached their destination, the SandWing sat a few meters away and took out a scroll to read.

Their destination turned out to be Flame's favourite reading spot nestled between the herb garden and the lilac bushes. As they walked by Umber leaned upwards to smell the sweet purple flowers before rushing after the red dragon.

Flame was already getting the graphicolls out when Umber sidled up beside him.

"So what's the plan?" Umber asked as he looked over Flame's shoulder. Flame shrugged and Umber stifled a sigh.

"How hard can it be to learn how to read?" Flame asked more to himself than to Umber. "I'll just...point to the words, you try to read them, and if you can't then I'll tell you what they are."

Wow. This is going to go SO well, Umber sniped silently. Flame scanned the scrolls laid out in front of him and chose the one on the far left.

"OK. So this is issue one of the Rise of Lord Evil, the story I was telling you about. We'll start here." Flame passed Umber the graphicoll and pointed to a box of text at the beginning. "That's the opening paragraph," he explained and then clasped his talons together. "You may start whenever you're ready," the SkyWing said in a mock Web's voice.

Umber stifled a laugh. He had not been at Jade Academy long but EVERYONE knew Webs and his infamous history lectures. He cleared his throat to get rid of the giggles and looked to the text. Luckily the first word was one he knew.

"'The'." Umber read expertly and beamed at Flame. The SkyWing furrowed his brow.

"Uh, good job? But there are more words there so...you know...whenever you're ready just go ahead." Flame tapped the text impatiently but surprisingly didn't say anything insulting.

Umber was a little impressed. *This is probably a record breaking moment for him: The Longest Amount of Time Spent Without Swearing.*

"Hurry up already!" Flame snapped and tore Umber from his thoughts.

"Sorry!" Umber yelped and began to scan the text again. "So...MOST of these words I don't know, but I recognize 'and' as well as 'it' and 'at'....but that's all."

Umber looked to Flame who was resting his chin on his talons, wearing a perplexed and annoyed expression. "That's it?" he asked in disbelief. "Those are the only words you know?"

Umber nodded. Flame looked to Umber, then to the graphicoll, then to Umber again, and then finally out into the gardens. "Maybe this approach wasn't the best."

"Ya, you think?" Umber quipped which earned him a sour scowl

from Flame.

"Fuck you! It's my first go at this teaching thing so cut me some slack!" He snorted and stood up. "You stay here. I need to go get some stuff."

Flame began to make his way through the gardens but he didn't get very far before Ibis stopped him. "And where do you think you're going?" she asked and lowered the scroll in her talons.

"Piss off. I'll just be gone for a few minutes..."

The SandWing shook her head. "That's not how it words, Flame. I go where you go."

A cloud of smoke shot out of Flame's nose. "Fine," he growled. "Just try to keep up." And before Ibis was even standing Flame ran off.

Umber watched as Flame bound across the garden, his lithe body leaping over flower beds and the way his muscles rippled with each step. Umber cleared his throat and looked back to the graphicoll and tried to ignore the way his heart quickened.

To pass the time until Flame returned Umber went through the pictures of the graphicoll, admiring the art and trying to figure out what was happening. Several minutes passed by until Umber saw Flame return with a frustrated Ibis not far behind. He was carrying a folded wooden easel, a large booklet of blank parchment, and several bottles of ink.

Umber shot up and ran over to help but before he could Flame had dumped the supplies unceremoniously onto the ground with a huff.

"What IS all this stuff? Where did you get it?" Umber demanded and inspected the materials. He unfolded the easel and tried to find a flat enough area to set it on.

"I stole it from the art center," Flame responded and grabbed the booklet of parchment paper to set on the easel. Umber made a choking sound and fixed Flame with a stern look.

"STOLE?" he repeated.

Flame rolled his eyes. "Would it shut you up if I said I 'borrowed' them instead?"

Umber considered this. "Perhaps."

"Well too bad because I stole them!" Flame threw his head back and gave a hearty laugh at his own joke. When Flame was finished he was met with Umber's unimpressed expression.

"Oh relax, MudWing. I'll return it when I'm finished with it. I hate art anyway." The SkyWing flipped opened the booklet to the first page and opened a bottle of black ink.

"So I was thinking I could teach you letters first. That's the first thing *I* was taught when I learned to read." Flame explained while he wrote down the letters of the alphabet on the paper. The SkyWing explained that for each letter there was an upper and lower case version. Umber stared intently at the squiggles on the paper. He recognized a lot of the lower case letters but he had no idea there were TWO versions of one letter.

However, this plan did seem more promising.

For the next hour Umber practiced naming and identifying the different letters as well as learning the sounds they made. When they were finished Flame tossed an ink bottle to Umber.

"Alright MudWing, let's see how much you remember." He flipped to another blank page of parchment and motioned for Umber to step up. "Pop quiz! List as many letters you can remember, and they HAVE to be in the right order!" Flame gave a large grin. He was having *way* to much fun bossing Umber around.

Taking a deep breath Umber approached the easel and dipped his talons in the ink. He began writing the letters out...well, *writing* would be a generous words for the blobby, messy shapes that Umber was creating.

After each letter was written Umber would turn to Flame to see if he had done it right or not. He could tell Flame was getting impatient from the gradual increase in swear words that were

coming from him, but he made sure Umber went through every letter.

Surprisingly Umber didn't mind the prickly teaching style. Flame was annoyed by *everything* Umber did, so he didn't really feel bad for asking hundreds of questions or doing something wrong. On the bright side, Umber was getting a lot more things right than wrong and after a grueling twenty minutes he was finished.

"Wow." Flame studied Umber's work. "That looks terrible."

Umber fluttered his wings in offense. "You know, *this* is the point where the teacher says something encouraging."

The red dragon thought for a moment. "Well at least you finished it before I died of boredom," he complimented.

I guess I'll take it. Umber accepted the praise with a long exhale. They had been practicing for a few hours and Umber was beginning to feel his focus slip. Also he was getting hungry again. He should have brought snacks with him!

"Maybe we should call it a day?" Umber asked as he wiped the ink off his talons with a cloth. "I'm getting kind of tired."

"Fine." Flame shrugged. "But you better help me take all this shit back."

With a groan Umber agreed. Flame took his bag of graphicolls and the awkward easel while Umber took the rest of the supplies along with his smaller bag. As it turned out, the art center was located in Flame's building. The lounge furniture had been partly removed and a section was opened to accommodate the art supplies. There were easels of various sizes spread out, a wall full of paints to use, both oil and water-colour, and there was also a section dedicating to sculpting.

"How come I never noticed his place?" Umber wondered aloud.

"Oh they just opened it," Flame responded and tossed the easel to the ground. Umber cringed as it hit the floor.

"Would you *please* be more careful?" Umber swiftly reached for the fallen easel and set it upright. Just as he was about to place the booklet back Flame stopped him.

"You should hold on to that and practice with it," he advised and Umber agreed. He certainly needed to practice but still felt slightly guilty. He rolled it up and tucked it away cautiously. *I hope no one minds me taking it.*

"So, uh." Flame rubbed his neck. "Was it a good class?"

The adorably nervous face on the SkyWing made Umber smile. "Yes! Thanks for offering to teach me." Umber flicked his gaze away. "I know it's probably not how you wanted to spend your afternoon."

The scarred dragon let out a bored huff. "Well I was just planning on sleeping anyway so it's not a big deal."

The two dragons sat in silence for several heartbeats.

"Ah, well," Umber broke the quietness. "I should go check on Sora. She's probably wondering where I went off to."

"Yeah. OK." Flame nodded and looked around the room. "But Umber, before you go..."the SkyWing paused and gazed around the room to make sure no one was listening in. Satisfied that whatever he had to say would remain between the two of them he continued. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry for the things I said to you in the garden the other day. I didn't mean them." He shuffled his talons on the ground and waited for Umber to answer.

"Oh," Umber managed to say. He had NOT been expecting that. He almost forgot to answer except Flame was now giving him a fierce and expectant look. Gathering his thoughts Umber finally sputtered something out. "Uh...it's alright, Flame. I could tell you were upset about something that day...I should have just let you be. So...I am sorry as well." Umber ducked his head in an apology.

Flame snorted in annoyance but Umber noticed the SkyWing's face grow red. "Would you stop being so fucking nice?" Flame

demanded. "Why did you have to turn my apology into YOUR apology? Why couldn't you just accept it and move on, but NOOOO you had to be super extra nice and apologize back to me for no reason. Well guess what? That ends now. I'm apologizing, you're shutting up, and that's that." Flame finished with a firm nod of his head.

The two dragons stared at each other.

And then burst out laughing.

Umber's quiet giggles racked his frame while Flame tried to stifle his louder roars of laughter. After several minutes of gasping for air they finally settled down.

"OK. I accept you're apology and I am not sorry about anything. Happy now?" Umber chuckled and Flame actually cracked a smile.

"Yeah. That's more like it."

It was a timid smile. It made the corner of Flame's eyes wrinkle in an adorable way and emitted a gentle warmth. Umber then decided that Flame looked VERY handsome when he smiled.

As quickly as it came, Flame's smile vanished as he looked over Umber's head to something behind him. Umber swiveled around to see what the problem was but a wave of delight passed through him as Sora came bounding up to him with Jet close by.

"Umber!" Sora cried and nearly tumbled into him. The sibs laughed and hugged.

"And where have you BEEN, young dragon!" Jet scolded as she approached. "You've made you sister sick with worry!"

Oh no! Umber turned to his sister and began to frantically apologize. "Sora, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - I didn't think I would be so long - I hope you're not too upset I had no idea-"

"Umber," Sora interrupted and placed her tail tip over his mouth to quiet him. "Stop fretting! I'm not *sick* with worry, but I was super confused when you didn't come back to the room within twenty

minutes. I thought you had just gone to pick up some scrolls."

"Yeah," Jet agreed. "We thought Flame had murdered you or something." The two SkyWings exchanged hostile glares and Sora nudged Jet.

"SHE thought that. I didn't," his sister clarified and gave Flame a small smile. Flame nodded and cleared his throat awkwardly.

Umber gave Flame a sympathetic shrug and then turned back to his sister. "Sorry 'bout that. I WAS going to come back but..." Umber's gaze flicked onto Flame. "...we got sidetracked. But look!" Umber took out the booklet he had tucked away in his knapsack and showed Sora the contents inside. "Flame is teaching me to read and write. Look what I did today!"

Sora let out an excited squeak and clasped his talons. "I am so proud of you!"

"Thanks." Umber blushed under his sister's praise and then turned to Flame with a coy expression. "You see? THAT'S how you properly encourage someone."

"*See, that's how you encourage someone,"* Flame mocked him with a stupid sounding voice and then returned to his normal, husky speech. "You're lucky I even decided to help you out."

"You're right." Umber realized and dipped his head. "Thanks!"

The sincerity seemed to make Flame flustered. "Whatever. Just give me the ink bottles and I'll put them away." Umber offered up the bottles and Flame snatched them from his talons and headed towards a table in the art center full of different coloured inks.

Once Flame was out of ear-shot Sora frantically grabbed Umber's talons again. "Umber," she whispered and her sparkling eyes darted around the room before continuing. "I want to tell you a secret."

"Shhh! Don't tell him!" Jet hushed and peered around warily.

Umber's nostrils flared. *UH, EXCUSE ME! Don't you dare leave me out of this!*

Sora pouted. "Please, Jet? He's my sib! Pleasepleasepleasepleasepleaseplease-"

"OK!" Jet relented as she tried, and failed, to keep a smile from spreading over her stern face.

With a triumphant glint in her eyes Sora spoke in a loud, exited whisper. "We're sneaking out and going GHOST hunting in the palace tonight."

Umber blinked in surprise and have them a quizzical look. "Ghost hunting?" he repeated, his gaze shifting between Jet and Sora.

"Don't tell me you idiots are ACTUALLY going to try and catch a ghost," Flame's sudden jeer jolted the group as he silently returned from the art center.

"How about you stop eavesdropping and go away," Jet articulated with a tense face.

The scarred dragon huffed out a plume of smoke. "I don't need to eavesdrop. MudWings are the WORST at whispering."

Umber tried to be offended, but...Flame did have a point. Sora seemed to also ignore this comment.

"But Jet says she knows where to find one! We can go and see it! Right, Jet?" Sora eyes were wild with excitement. Umber had never considered her to be a thrill seeker but then again, was ghost hunting even all that dangerous?

Flame gave a condescending scoffed. "That's impossible since there is no such thing as ghosts."

"Just because YOU don't believe in them doesn't mean they're not real," the pink and orange SkyWing pointed out. "Besides, you're not invited to come. It's just me and Sora going."

"Umber can come too, can't he?" Umber's sister quickly asked while leaning against him. "I could never imagine chasing after ghosts without my sib!" Sora smiled at Umber and he grinned back. "You *do* want to come, don't you?" She asked him.

The only time Umber had been exposed to ghosts was through scary stories and in those stories ghosts were never good, so he was apprehensive to say the least. But the pleading look on his sister's face won him over.

"Of course!" he said with fake confidence. Sora fluttered her wings with joy and it was decided. He was going on this ghost hunting adventure whether he wanted to or not.

"Well if Umber is going than so am I," Flame announced with a defiant glint in his eyes. "And when the ghost doesn't show up I will mock all of you for the rest of your lives."

Umber was surprised that Flame was willing to go, especially since he would be giving up a night of sleep to run around Queen Ruby's palace with a group of dragons he wasn't particularly fond of. That's when Umber thought of something.

"Flame...is Ibis going to be OK with you running around in the middle of the night?"

All the confidence in the SkyWing's face drained as his eyes looked at the SandWing that was, luckily, not paying attention to their conversation and was busy inspecting a strange, half-finished sculpture.

"Yeah. No babysitters allowed," Jet jeered. She probably thought that Flame would surrender at this point. She was wrong.

Flame paused and Umber noticed his tail-tip twitch as he thought. Finally he spoke grimly. "Don't worry about Ibis. I'll handle it. So where are we meeting tonight?"

Umber's eyes widened and he fluttered his wings in alarm. "Flame!" he hissed. "What are you thinking? You'll get in trouble!"

The SkyWing fixed Umber with cold eyes. "I *said* don't worry about it. Now are we doing this or not?"

Chapter 11

This is so fucking stupid. I can't believe I'm risking my ass to do this!

Flame was currently tucked into a tight ball in his bed as he waited for Ibis to go to bed as well. But she wouldn't! She was sitting on one of the floor pillows with a candle-lamp next to her while reading a scroll. Flame had gone to bed early in the hopes that Ibis would do so as well. BUT NOPE. The fucking dragon WOULD NOT go to bed. And to make matters worse, she was sleeping in *his* room. They had brought in a spare bed for her and everything.

Flame stifled a growl as he peeked out from under his wing to look out his window. The stars were twinkling to life against the deep black of the sky. He was cutting it close. They had agreed to meet around moon-high outside of the west-most building and then sneak into the palace.

After what seemed like hours of agonizing waiting Ibis finally blew out the candle-lamp and shuffled into her bed. Once more Flame had to wait until her breathing slowed and deepened, and then waited an extra ten minutes for good measure before he shot up and prepared to leave. He placed his pillowed and some extra things under the blanket to make a shape of a sleeping dragon beneath before quickly rushing to the window sill. Slowly he opened the curtains and then the pushed the window open. Flame clenched his teeth as a wave of cricket chirps and frog croaks rushed in. He risked a quick glance towards Ibis. She was still sleeping soundly.

With a breath of relief Flame jumped out of his ground-floor window and into the tall grass below. The crickets and frogs become silent as he landed among them. Poking his head up he looked around. His only company was the vast moonlit meadow that stretched on before him and the clear skies above that sent down a cool breeze.

OK. I got out with no one seeing me. Now I just need find those losers.

Keeping low Flame ran along the wall of the building in search of the others. The grass whipped past his snout as he scurried past opened windows with lights still on within. In those cases he would slow down and sneak past to just in case the dragon within were to hear him.

Finally he reached the other end of the building but was dismayed when no one was there. Flame tried to remain calm as his stomach flopped nervously. Had this all been a trick? A set up to get him in trouble?

I bet Jet set this up! he internally snarled and whipped around to head back. *I bet those fuckers are laughing at me now, watching me run around the place like an idiot. The next time I see them-"*

"Flame!"

At the sound of his name the SkyWing startled and turned his head to see Umber bounding towards him through the long grass. Flame's heart skipped a beat at the sight of the MudWing. Hot shame spread across his face as he realized it hadn't been a set up.

"Umber! Keep your voice down!" A harsh whisper emerged from the grass and Jet poked her head up. Next Sora peeked over the grass blades, her eyes sparkling wild with excitement and adventure.

Her brother, however, had nothing but dread in his deep eyes as nervously tore at the plants around him. It made Flame wilt to see Umber so worried.

"So how did you slip past your babysitter?" Jet quipped as stood up and waded through the meadow to approach Flame. Umber also perked and waited for his answer.

Flame's ears twitched in irritation but he hid it with a malicious smile. "I slit her throat and left her dying on the floor in a pool of her own blood."

All the colour drained from their faces and they stared at him with bug-eyes. Flame did everything he could to stifle a laugh.

Finally Umber spoke up. "Ha, you're...joking...right?"

"FUCKING OBVIOUSLY!" Flame barked and was immediately shushed by the other three. Flame waved them away with his wings. "I left her sleeping soundly in my room. Happy now?"

Sora exhaled a sigh of relief. "Oh good. That would have been awful."

"Well now that we all have THAT horrible image in our minds, let's get a move on," Jet spoke with fake cheer and the group of dragons took to the sky and flew towards the tall towers of Queen Ruby's palace.

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The band of dragons approached the massive mountain that silently overlooked the Healing Center. It stood unyielding and powerful over the valley, like a vast sentinel. From high up on its peaks the main palace emerged. It was the oldest part of the palace and was hardly used in this day and age. Over the thousands of years the palace had been expanded and its towers and buildings crawled all along the mountain's face, cascading downward until they reached the base.

There was a majestic new palace near ground level that Scarlet had commissioned when she had been Queen. That was where the current royal family resided. Flame knew all these facts since his mother had mostly lived here during the war and he had used to beg her to tell him everything about it. Not that he had cared about the palace; he had just done it to spend time with his mom.

So this is the place my mom would disappear to for months on end. And it didn't ever cross her fucking mind to take me with her!

"Flame?" Umber timidly called his name and brushed their wings together as they flew. "Are you alright? You have a sad face on."

"Fuck off, I'm fine!" Flame snapped, but a flicker of hurt passed over Umber's eyes. Flame cleared his throat. "Sorry. I'm fine," he repeated more calmly. Flame was making an effort to be less rude to the MudWing. After all, they were *friends*.
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But it always amazed him how Umber seemed to just read his mind and know when he was upset. Thankfully Umber didn't push further, although Flame could tell the MudWing was pretty curious. Eager to get Umber's focus off of him, Flame decided to bother Jet.

"So where is this ghost of yours?" he called to the dragoness that was flying at the head of the formation. At first Flame thought she hadn't heard him, but a few seconds later she answered.

"Well the particular ghost we are looking for tonight is in the older section of the palace, higher up on the mountain."

Flame rolled his eyes and as he did he saw Umber make a grimace.

"So are there lots of ghosts around?" the MudWing asked with barely concealed anxiety.

Perhaps Jet hadn't heard the hint of fear in his voice, because she said the exact opposite of anything reassuring.

"Oh yeah, there are HUNDREDS of ghosts here. This place has a long history of assassinations, poisonings, betrayals, and fights to the death for the throne. You know, just your average royal family stuff." Jet shrugged and abruptly gasped. "OH and don't forget all the spirits of those who died horrible, agonizing deaths in the arena!" she chirped and Umber paled.

"But what about the ghost we are looking for now?" Sora inquired. "What's the story behind that?"

Jet's eyes lit up. "Excellent question, Sora! I would be glad to tell you all the story." The SkyWing cleared her throat and her previous bubbly face was replaced by a grim expression. She spoke in a dramatic voice, "According to the legends, about 300 years ago an unnamed Prince was to be married to a beautiful, noble dragoness. To everyone who saw them they were the perfect couple, but on their wedding night the Prince went crazy and murdered his fiancé by slicing off her head." Jet sliced the air with her talons to add emphasis. Umber squeaked nearby and Jet continued her lively story. "And ever since that night, her spirit has haunted this castle. Blood curling screams in the middle of the night, candles blowing

off and then lighting themselves back on, the sound of whispering behind you, cold spots...it's all been reported," Jet stated matter-of-factly.

"What a bunch of bullshit!" Flame interjected. "You don't actually believe this stuff, do you?" He turned to Umber, expecting him to be just as skeptical but the MudWing's face had gone nearly white and his had pupils were the size of pins. Concern pulsed through Flame. "Whoa, Umber, relax. You do know that ghosts don't really exist, right?"

Flame ignored the snort from Jet and waited for Umber to answer.

"Yep. Right. It's just a story," the MudWing spoke briskly but his terrified expression remained etched on his face. Flame regarded him.

Ah crap, I can't have him bailing on me! What else can I say to cheer him up?

"You know," Flame began. "Even if there WAS a ghost, which there isn't, I would definitely beat them up if they tried to hurt you."

The fear on Umber's face was momentarily broken as he let out a breathy laugh. It made Flame feel good to see Umber smile, but he couldn't help taking slight offence.

"Are you laughing because I cheered you up or because you don't think I could take on a ghost?" Flame asked Umber but Jet answered.

"You can't fight a ghost!" she commented. "They're already dead, there's nothing you can do to stop them."

Once again this was the worst thing to say as Flame heard Umber take in a sharp breath.

"Well in that case I will just have to die somehow, and THEN I will come back as a ghost myself and battle the OTHER ghost for all of eternity." Flame flashed Umber a toothy grin and the MudWing laughed. *Good. Maybe if I show him how stupid this all is he won't be so scared.*

The air was getting cooler now as they flew higher up the mountain. As they followed the climbing palace Flame noticed the effects of time on the architecture. Plants that would have once struggled to find perch on the mountain's face now grew comfortably in the old castle. Flame could see trees sticking out of windows, walls covered in hardy shrubs, and berry-filled bushes on the partly caved-in roofs.

If plants got in I'm sure the place is festering with animals as well, Flame reasoned as the group began to bank towards a roofless courtyard. As they alighted down their wing beats rustled the leaves on the ground and sent some squirrels and birds fleeing. The courtyard was surrounded by four high walls and in the center stood a broken fountain with the statue of a beautiful SkyWing female inside. Each wall had a large archway that lead to a section of the abandoned castle.

"I don't see any ghost," Flame stated right away and was pleased when Jet released an exasperated sigh.

"Just shut up and follow me. I'll take you guys around and maybe we'll see something SPOOKY." She nudged Sora and the two females strolled boldly into the archway behind them. Umber and Flame exchanges wary glances and followed them in.

They first entered a large hallway that had one wall perforated with large windows that allowed the moonlight and cold air to stream in. On the other side were half rotted portraits of noble looking SkyWings. They had only made several steps in when Flame gasped as he felt Umber suddenly lean into him to hide from the staring portraits.

"Their eyes are following me," the terrified dragon peeped and ducked behind Flame.

Flame huffed. *I don't have time for this shit!* Flame breathed a stream of fire towards the portrait and it immediately lit up, the fire creating flickering shadows down the hall.

"FLAME!" Umber yelled, his fear momentarily evaporating as he scolded the SkyWing. "Why did you do that? You can't just

DESTROY things on a whim!"

Flame shrugged as he watched the paper blacken and eventually the portrait fell to the floor in a heap of ash. "I did it because it was scaring you," he spoke honestly.

Umber stared at him before quickly adverting his gaze. "Uh, thanks I guess," he said and Flame swore he was blushing.

"HEY! WHAT THE HECK IS GOING ON DOWN THERE!" Jet shouted at them from the other end of the hall. Her and Sora had gone far ahead and were already exploring the rooms at the end.

"Don't worry! I handled it!" Flame called back and even from this distance he could practically hear Jet roll her eyes.

"Well stop destroying things or I WILL come down there and end you!" And with that Jet retreated back into the adjoining room. Flame stuck his tongue out in defiance, even though Jet didn't see.

He heard Umber chuckled beside him. "I would be careful Flame. Jet is pretty tough. Your plan of becoming a ghost and going to battle might happen sooner than you think."

"Pfft. I could take her," Flame assured and then ran up to another portrait. "Check this one out! That has GOT to be the stupidest face I have ever seen." Flame mimicked the face on the portrait, which looked like it had been painted mid sneeze.

Umber burst out laughing. Flame smiled. He was beginning to like the MudWing's laugh. Once the brown dragon had regained his composure they hurried to catch up with Sora and Jet. They found them in a grand dining room. The tables and chairs were still there but they were so old Flame doubted they could support any weight without collapsing. Cobwebs hung everywhere, including all over the large fireplace on the left wall which also had an enormous portrait above. The SkyWing in the painting gazed forward in the direction of the vast window that took up most of the right wall. At least her eyes weren't following Umber around or else Flame would have had to burn her as well.

Jet and Sora were exploring a cabinet at the end of the room that was still full of dishes.

"This is so crazy!" Sora exclaimed. "How could they just leave behind all this stuff?"

"I guess it was sort of a gradual thing," Jet explained. "They just kept adding newer sections and everyone just started living there and buying more things to fill up their new homes. They didn't want the old stuff anymore."

Flame strolled up to the two dragonesses and sighed loudly. "WHERE is this fucking ghost at? We've been here for, like, five minutes and all I've seen are some boring portraits and spiders."

Jet's ears twitched. She inhaled and exhaled deeply while Sora brushed her wings against the pinkish dragoness. "Ghosts are not static beings that just stay in one place and can be found whenever you want. They appear to you when they WANT to," Jet hissed.

"Oh for FUCK SAKE'S!" Flame groaned. "So essentially you brought us here for no reason." He leaned against the wall and frowned.

"Of course not! We're exploring for fun AND I never promised we'd see a ghost," Jet pointed out.

"And there's nothing wrong with that!" Umber quickly added as he joined the group. "The 'not seeing a ghost' part, that is." He gave a nervous laugh.

Sora looked to Jet hopefully. "But do you think we'll see anything tonight? Anything *scary*?" Sora's intense desire to see a ghost unnerved Flame. What had made her so damn interested in dead people all of a sudden?

Jet looked coyly at Sora from the corner of her eye. "You know, not everything scary comes from ghosts and monsters and stuff."

Sora tilted her head with curiosity while Flame rolled his eyes and said, "What the hell does THAT mean?"

Jet put on a haughty air as if she were some sort of respected

professor about to lecture her enthralled students. "Well, there's a school of philosophy that believes that our supernatural experiences are not external in source. They come from our subconscious, and anytime we look into something dark and unknown, like the night sky, it becomes a mirror of our subconscious."

A hush fell over the group until Umber spoke up. "Uhhh, what does THAT mean?"

Jet strode over to him and spoke softly, "It means that the monsters aren't out there, they're in *here*." She tapped her temples with her talons. Flame heard Umber gulp.

"Wow. I think I liked the ghosts more when there were on the *outside* of my head." The MudWing's legs were shaking and he looked pretty close to passing out.

"So this was just a BIG waste of my time essentially." Flame twitched his tail with irritation.

Jet shrugged. "Yep. I guess you shouldn't have come then."

Flame narrowed his eyes. *Fucking bitch.*

"That's it. I'm out of here. I'm not risking my ass any longer." The SkyWing whipped around and stocked out, his talons hitting the stone floor.

"Wait! Flame!" He heard Umber chase him into the hallway. "Please don't go! Can't you stay a little longer?"

Flame sighed and paused his steps. "Well I sure as hell don't WANT to stay, so why should I?"

The brown dragon became flustered as he tried to think of a reason. "Well, I thought that...um..."

"You could always leave with me," Flame softly suggested and leaned in slightly towards Umber. The MudWing let out a small gasp at the closeness and Flame backed off, quickly realizing what he was doing.

Umber's face took on a shade of red and he cleared his throat while he thought about Flame's offer. After a moment he regretfully shook his head. "Sora would be so upset if I left...I'll stay for her." He looked absolutely miserable and Flame could hardly bear it.

Oh shit. Why does he have to look so pathetic? HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO LEAVE NOW?

After a few moments of arguing with himself Flame finally relented. *Oh, fuck it. I'm already in deep trouble. I might as well get comfortable in it.*

"FINE. I'll stick around for a while longer. But only if I get to burn more things."

Umber's eyes lit up and he laughed. "I'm sure we can find something else for you to destroy."

Side by side the two dragons retraced their steps and returned to the dining room to find Jet and Sora were gone.

"Ah, crap. They wondered off," Flame noted with a huff. Umber's eyes became wild with panic. Flame tried to calm him. "Don't freak out! I'm sure they're just around the corner." At the other end of the dining room was yet another door. Flame opened it and poked his head through. It was a windowless hallway but there was no sign of Sora or Jet. *Uh oh. Umber's so going to freak.* And he did.

"SORA!" Umber cried and pushed his way past Flame into the hall. "SORA WHERE ARE YOU?" His voice was shaking now. Flame was feeling a bit nervous himself. Not because of Sora or Jet, he didn't think they were in any actual danger, but because he had never seen Umber this upset.

"Umber, you have to relax, just...take deep breaths or something." But the mud dragon wasn't listening and was running around the hall checking the rooms. Flame groaned and chased after him. Finally he caught up to the frantic dragon and gripped him by the shoulders to keep him still. "STOP PANICKING!" Flame shouted and gently shook Umber's shoulders. "They are probably off exploring. Let's just stay in the dining room and they will probably return that

way when they leave."

Umber nodded absently. "OK. Good idea."

The dragons made their way back to the room to find the door had been jammed shut. Flame calmed Umber's fearful squeaked by explaining a draft must have slammed it shut and it had JUST SO HAPPEN to get stuck.

"B-but I didn't hear it slam," Umber's voice quivered.

"Well yeah, you were screaming so much you could hardly hear anything else."

Without the light from the dining room the hallway was extremely dim. Flame blew a plumb of fire. "We'll have to find another way around," he said before started down the hallway with Umber brushing up against him.

Flame checked each of the rooms and went into the only one that had another door in it. Flame grimaced. *I'll have to be careful. This place is like a maze. I don't want to get lost.* The chosen room was a small library. It had likely been someone's study at one point. Now it was just dusty and smelled like farts. Luckily there was a window and that allowed some light from the moons to enter.

"Your sister and Jet probably went this way as well," Flame mentioned to Umber who was sitting nervously nearby. The two went forward to leave but Flame paused as he heard something behind him. Umber noticed and stopped just at the door. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

Flame shushed him and strained his ears. It sounded like a voice. Maybe it was Jet or Sora. But when it spoke again it came from right beside him and was no more than a whisper.

Murderer.

It was Stonemover's voice.

Chapter 12

Flame whirled around tightly to find no one was there. "What the hell? Did you hear that?" he demanded Umber who only returned his question with fearful eyes.

"Flame...stop messing with me. I-I didn't hear anything."

"But you must have! It was right behind me I swear-" Flame slammed his jaw shut. He was sounding as crazy as Umber was. Taking a deep breath Flame hid his fear. *It's just my imagination getting the better of me. There is no one here...especially not Stonemover.* Although a terrifying thought came to mind. *Could he be using his animus magic to curse me? Is this revenge for trying to kill him?*

"Flame?" Umber's gentle voice tore into his thoughts. The MudWing was looking at him with concern.

Fuck. I can't let Umber see me freaking out. With a deep breath Flame hurried forward. "Sorry. I just...thought I heard something. It was nothing though," he fibbed. Umber seemed unconvinced but silently followed Flame out of the library They entered into a small bedroom about the size of the room before, but Flame wasn't paying all that much attention.

There's no way Stonemover would curse me. He wouldn't even use a sliver of his power to heal my face! That stingy liar. No, all this stuff is just in my head. Jet's stupid 'darkness is a mirror to the unconscious' crap is just freaking me out. There is no ghost here and even if there was I would SO kick its ass!

"What are you doing?" the MudWing's worried voice spoke up and Flame snapped out of his thoughts to realize he had just been pacing the room.

"Oh, uh, just checking the room. Yep! No ghosts here!" He gave Umber his best reassuring smile, which looked more like a grimace.

The mud dragon fixed Flame with a hard stare. "Listen, just relax Flame. Nothing here can hurt us. It'll be alright," Umber gently placed his wing against Flame's and the warmth calmed the SkyWing's racing heart but it didn't prevent the twinge of irritation that coursed through him.

"Yeah, I KNOW that! That's what I've been telling you this whole time!" Flame paused and narrowed his eyes as he realized something. "Five seconds ago you freaking out and now you're telling ME to calm down? What gives?"

Umber seemed just as shocked at this development. "Yeah, you're right." He scratched his neck in thought. "I guess when I saw you were upset I just...forgot about my own problems for a while."

WHY IS HE SO FUCKING NICE?

Flame snorted. "Well you can go back to being terrified now because NOTHING is wrong with me and I am NOT upset about anything."

Umber gave Flame a warm smile. "It's alright to be scared, Flame." The MudWing reached a talon out to touch Flame but the SkyWing flinched out of his reach.

"Let's just get out of here. This room leads to nowhere." Hiding his blush Flame fled the room and Umber followed shortly after.

Stupid Umber. I am NOT UPSET about anything. In fact I have never been less upset than I am right now and I am not making any sense but that's fine because I am fine and everything is fine...holy crap I sound insane.

They were now back in the hallway outside of the library. He felt Umber sit close to him.

"I forgot how dark it was out here," Umber spoke before breathing a plumb of fire. In the quick light of the fire Flame could see more portraits hung on the adjacent walls. With a quick stream of fire Flame set a nearby painting ablaze.

"Flame!" Umber scolded and in the flickering light Flame could see

his frowning visage.

"I did it to give us some light!" Flame defended. "Let's see if we can find some candles or torches somewhere."

Umber stared up at the ceiling as he thought and then perked. "Oh! I saw some candles in the library! They were on the desk."

"Fine, then go get them," Flame ordered while lighting another portrait of fire. When he turned around he saw that Umber had not budged.

"Could you...come with me?" the MudWing quietly asked and shuffled his talons. Flame rolled his eyes and led the way.

"What happened to that nothing-here-can-harm-us attitude you had a few seconds ago? Honestly Umber, I can't be there to hold your talons for everything," Flame lectured as Umber went to the cobweb riddled desk and grabbed the candelabra. It had a ring-like attachment on it that allowed it to be carried around by the thumb of the wing. Umber lit it and passed it to Flame who hooked it onto his folded wings. "OK. Let's find a way to get out of this fucking place."

"What about my sister and Jet?" Umber reminded.

Damn it! I was hoping he would forget.

"Come on, Umber. They're FINE. We should just leave them to their...whatever the hell they are doing..."

"I am NOT leaving without my sister!" Umber's unyielding voice interrupted but then he let out a shaking breath. "But, if you want to leave t-then go ahead. I will be fine on my own." The MudWing lifted his chin and wore the WORST brave face Flame had ever seen.

Even though chills were running up and down Flame's spine and every fiber of his being wanted to ditch that place, the thought of leaving Umber here alone made him feel even worse.

Flame inspected his talons and pretended to act indifferent. "It

doesn't matter to me if we leave or not...it's just boring here, that's all. But I can stay if you want me to. I don't care."

Umber eyed him warily and Flame tried to keep his face neutral. "So...you'll stay with me?" the brown dragon carefully asked with a hopeful lilt.

Flame huffed. "Well since you INSIST I guess I will. But you OWE me one, MudWing. Now let's find those two idiots."

Flame ignored Umber's offended protests and continued down the hallway towards a grand staircase. Flame took a deep breath and began to climb them. *It was just my imagination. I never heard Stonemover. That's ridiculous. There is no one here but me and Umber...*

Flame's thoughts were cut off and his heart turned to ice as he saw a figure at the top of the stairs. He was half shrouded in shadows but Flame immediately recognized who it was. It was Stonemover.

And he was waiting for Flame.

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Umber tried to remain calm. He had maybe, sort of, potentially told Flame a little, itty-bitty fib when he had said that 'seeing Flame in distress had made him forget his own problems'.

Truthfully, he was FREAKING OUT and had been the entire time. It didn't help that now Flame was freaking out as well. Umber knew Flame was trying to hide it but they guy was pretty much an open book when it came to feelings. *I wonder what could have scared him so suddenly. One minute he was strutting around kicking down doors and now he's peaking around corners.* Umber gulped. *Maybe there IS a ghost in here and only he can see it? Can ghosts only present themselves to one person? I wonder if there would be a reason to...*

A yelp from Flame made Umber look up and he saw the SkyWing frozen in fear at the bottom of the staircase, his eyes fixed onto something at the top. *Uh-oh.*

"Flame, what is it?" Umber rushed over and peered at the SkyWing's white face.
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"I-it was S-Stonemover he was sitting up there at the top of the stairs. I swear I saw him I..." Flame blinked a few times and let out a shuddery breath. Umber cocked his head.

Stonemover? Wasn't that Sunny's dad?

"You mean that animus that is stuck in Jade Moutain? Why would *he* be here?" Umber asked but Flame didn't answer. He had turned and ran back to the jammed door that led to the dining room. The candles flickered heavily as Flame grabbed the handle and began to shake the door until the handle fell off. The scarred dragon then began to slam his shoulder into the wooden barrier until it began to splinter.

"FLAME! CALM DOWN!" Umber hollered but Flame ignored him. There was wild and terrified glint in the SkyWing's eyes as he frantically tried to escape.

Umber fluttered his wings in alarm. *He's going to hurt himself! WHAT SHOULD I DO?*

He did the first thing that came to mind and tackled Flame to the ground. It was easy enough, Umber was much heavier, but Flame had terror induced adrenaline super strength on his side. They scuffled on the ground for a few minutes before Flame ran out of energy and Umber successfully pinned him onto his back.

Umber was standing over Fame as the two males caught their breath. Slowly the shroud of fear in Flame's eyes lifted and his vision became clear. Their gazes met and both their faces turned a bright red.

"GET THE FUCK OFF OF ME!" he shouted and threw Umber off. He landed on his side and quickly sat up, giving his neck and awkward rub. Flame reached for the candelabra that had been flung to the floor. He quickly picked it up with shaky talons and re-lit it.

"Uh, sorry about that but you were kind of going insane." Umber held his breath while Flame gazed around the room with murderous intend, flinching at every minute sound. It was obvious the SkyWing was on edge and Umber hoped nothing else would pop up

to spook him.

"Umber?" A soft voice spoke and both males jumped. It was Sora and her voice was coming from the other side of the now partly destroyed door. Umber heaved a sigh of relief. There was a hole just large enough in the door for Umber to poke his head through.

"Sora! I'm so glad to see you!" he exclaimed. "Are you alright? Where have you been?" he demanded anxiously.

"Oh, Umber. I'm SO sorry I left! I had thought you and Flame had gone back so Jet and I went exploring. We ran back when we heard yelling and crashing going on in this room."

Umber hid his hurt feelings. Had she really not been upset when she had turned around to see gone? Umber shook away the thought. "Yeah, that was us. The door locked on us for some reason so we tried to break it down." He purposely omitted the real reason and changed the subject. "But also I was worried about you!" he scolded.

Sora giggled. "I was fine! I had Jet with me." At the sound of her name the SkyWing's face popped in beside Sora's.

"Oh hey, Umber. You didn't happen to see any ghosts around, did you?"

Umber flicked his gaze towards Flame but the SkyWing was looking at the floor with a blank expression. Umber turned back to Jet and shrugged. "Sorry. Nope." *Well, at least not any REAL ghosts.*

"Oh well, maybe next time," Jet sighed. "But I guess we should probably get this door down so you guys can leave."

Umber nodded. "Yes, that would be GREATLY appreciated."

Unfortunately the door would not un-stick so they were forced to tear it down which Jet had great fun doing. Meanwhile Flame silently stood off the side with his wings wrapped around his lean frame. Once the door was removed the scarred dragon pushed passed them and bolted for the courtyard. They watched him leave and Jet raised an eyebrow.

"What's his problem?" she asked and then smirked. "OH! Don't tell me he saw a ghost! YES! I am SO going to rub this in his face..."

"No no no, don't do that!" Umber urgently interrupted and explained. "I think he had some sort of panic attack in here, I'm not sure. But DON'T mention it."

"Will he be alright?" Sora asked and cast a worried glance in the direction Flame had run off to. Umber approached his sister and leaned against her.

"I don't know. But...I think it had something to do with Stonemover," he confessed in a low voice and both dragonesses looked at him with puzzled expressions.

"Who?" Jet asked. So Umber explained who Stonemover was but this did not seem to cure Jet and Sora's confusion.

"That just raises further questions!" Jet exclaimed. Umber only shook his head and shrugged his wings helplessly.

Sora was silent for a moment. Her eyes were sad as she spoke. "Well, whatever he's going through I hope he can overcome it."

Umber rested his head against hers. "Me too," he agreed. *I just wish he would let me help him.*

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Flame flew as fast as his large wings could carry him. He soared away from the cryptic palace filled with nightmares and guilt. His mind was a whir of fearful thoughts that wouldn't stop pounding in his head.

He was tempted to just keep flying until he fell from the sky in exhaustion but some self-preserving part of his brain took control and steered him back towards his room. He landed in the tall grass below his window and flopped down as his strong lungs sucked in air.

He knew that what he had saw in the palace had not been a ghost. It hadn't been the real Stonemover either.
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It had been his guilt. Plain and simple.

But why it had decided to manifest itself in a "haunted" palace was beyond him. Flame was finally coming to his sense and now the embarrassment took hold. He buried his head in his talons as he remembered how stupid and cowardly he had acted in front of Umber. Hopefully the MudWing wouldn't bring it up or tell anyone.

This is all such BULLSHIT, he whined to himself. *Stupid Stonemover, stupid haunted palace. ARG I HATE IT ALL!* He let out his frustration on the tall grass, pulling out talon-fulls of stalks and throwing them about. At this point he knew he was just throwing a tantrum because he was ashamed of how terrified he had been.

The sun was just beginning to rise. The stars were disappearing while the black skies behind them became a light purple. He doubted he would get any sleep but maybe he could just lie in bed for the rest of the day until his appointment. On wobbly legs Flame pulled himself up and crawled through his window.

Once inside he froze. Ibis had placed a floor pillow just beside the window to sit and was watching him enter with folded arms and a barely hidden snarl.

"How nice of you to show up." Her voice was tight. "Now *where have you been*?"

Chapter 13

"Now Flame, would you please explain to us why you ran off in the middle of the night? You should have not left the premises without at LEAST informing someone," Starfish scolded and clasped his talons together. His Healer didn't seem angry at all, only disappointed which made Flame feel worse.

Meanwhile Ibis stood close by. She had been wearing the same twisted grimace on her face since she had found Flame crawling into his bedroom window. As soon as Starfish had arrived that morning she had practically dragged Flame by the ear to see the SeaWing in his office.

Now they both stood looking down at him like parents scolding their hatchling.

Flame shuffled his talons. How the hell was he going to get out of this one? Was there some sort of three-strike rule for kicking dragons out of the Healing Center? Ibis cleared her throat impatiently and Flame took a deep breath to answer.

"I was...uh..." he decided to stick as close to the truth as he could, "hunting ghosts."

Starfish and Ibis stared at him like he had grown another head.

"Ghost hunting?" Starfish echoed.

"That's a lie!" Ibis accused and glared at him. "You were trying to escape, weren't you?"

Flame snarled. "How DARE you call me a fucking liar! And I am telling the TRUTH. I went to the old part of the palace and explored around for the night and then came back. I swear!" He looked to Starfish for support.

A spark of fear ignited in his stomach as he saw Starfish's uncertain expression. *He believes me, right? Shit, maybe they ARE going to kick me out this time. What will mother say? Will she just send me off to somewhere else?*

Finally the Healer spoke. "I had no idea you were interested in ghosts."

"I'm not! It's all a bunch of bullshit!" he blurted out defiantly and then bit his tongue. "Uh...but that's why I went." He tried to come up with a fib. "I heard rumors that there was a ghost up there and I wanted to see for myself. Also, spoiler alert, there is no fucking ghost. Just a bunch of moldy paintings and some raccoons."

Ibis scoffed. "Can you believe this?" She nudged Starfish and turned back to Flame. "And who told you these rumours to begin with?"

Flame shot his gaze up to meet her eyes and he clenched his jaw. *If that bitch thinks I'm some sort of snitch she better think again!*

"It's just something I've heard around," he answered vaguely and gave Ibis a smug grin. To his confusion she returned it with her own wolfish smile.

"I knew you would say that," she said. "So let me get this straight, you have NO proof or witnesses that can support your claims?"

Flame opened his mouth then closed it. *Oh fuck.*

"Well...no...."

"And you admit to breaking the Healing Center rules of leaving the ground without permission AND ditching your official guard?"

"What? Those aren't rules! You made that shit up!" Flame accused.

Cautiously Starfish spoke up. "Ibis, those rules only apply for high-risk patience."

"Okay so maybe he didn't need permission to leave but he still ran off without his guard present so he has STILL broken the rules." The SandWing nodded firmly and fixed Flame with a cold stare. "As

such, he will have to be detained in his room until Queen Ruby decides how to handle this."

Both Starfish and Flame staggered back in shock.

"That's ridiculous!" Starfish exclaimed. It was the loudest Flame had ever heard his voice go. "Flame is NOT a danger. There is NO need for him to be detained!"

"Starfish, you know the rules," Ibis said gently. "You have to be professional about this and treat this unfortunate situation as you would with any other patient."

Flame withheld a scoff. *Oh right, this "unfortunate situation". What a passive-aggressive, lying piece of shit!* But before Flame could speak up he was struck silent as Starfish stepped in front of him, acting as a barrier from the SandWing.

"I cannot let you imprison my patient for something so foolish!" the SeaWing insisted with a defiant glint in his eyes. Ibis blinked as if confused but then narrowed her eyes and stared down Starfish.

Flame watched with amazement, completely thunderstruck at seeing his Healer actually ANGRY for once. *Yeah! You tell that bitch, Starfish! PUNCH HER IN THE FACE!* he silently encouraged.

The tension in the room was momentarily disrupted by a knock on the door. Starfish cleared his throat and fluttered his wings awkwardly. "Come in!" he called with his normal, pleasant voice.

Slowly the door slid open and in stepped Zephyr followed by a sullen looking Umber, Sora, and Jet. As Umber entered he lifted his gaze and their eyes met. A pleasant tingling sensation crawled over Flame's scales and he quickly looked away.

"Zephyr! It's good to see you," Starfish said with audible relief.

Ibis simply snorted. "Would you mind coming back another time. We're busy right now."

Zephyr ignored the SandWing. "Yes, I figured you'd all be here, no doubt discussing Flame's punishment. But before you continue you

should consider what these three troublesome dragons told me this morning," Zephyr said as the three young dragons next to her exchanged sheepish glances.

Starfish furrowed his brow. "I don't understand. What did they say?"

"That Flame didn't act alone. All four of them snuck out last night to go to the palace. Jet claims in was her idea to begin with." The SkyWing Healer fixed her daughter with a stern look that seemed to say *we'll talk about this later*.

Umber cleared his throat and stepped forward, wilting slightly as the Healers and guard looked to him. "Uh, it's like Zephyr said. We snuck out to go look for ghosts in the old part of the palace. It wasn't Flame's idea to begin so...please don't punish him." He looked up at Ibis and Starfish with his deep, pleading eyes.

The SeaWing turned to Flame. "So you DID have others with you. Why didn't you say anything about it?"

Flame looked at the floor. "I'm no snitch."

Starfish let out an exasperated sigh and then spoke to the guard. "Well, Ibis. It seems that Flame *does* have witnesses."

The SandWing was unyielding. "Humph, he STILL broke the rules by purposefully leaving my sight. Queen Ruby will have to..."

"I assure you, Ibis," Zephyr spoke. "Queen Ruby will not care that Flame escaped to do a harmless activity. It would be absurd to get her involved. But..." Zephyr interjected just as Ibis was about to protest. "...I do think that Flame should receive some sort of punishment which will be decided by Starfish."

At the same time Flame and Ibis began to holler in protest.

"Punishment? What am I being punished for I didn't do anything!" Flame hissed while Ibis exclaimed. "You can't let him get off that easy!"

Zephyr raised a talon to silence them. "I can see there are some...hostilities between you two," The SkyWing noted while Ibis

and Flame glared at each other. "Perhaps you two should take a break from each other today."

The SandWing turned her glare onto Zephyr. "What? But that would be against protocol!"

Sparks of tension crackled in the air as Zephyr silently strode forward to stand before Ibis. Zephyr was shouter but her voice held the command. "During Queen Ruby's absence *I* am the Matron of the Healing Center and therefore have the power to overrule any protocol. So I suggest you *take a break*," she hissed out the last part of the sentence to indicate it was more of an order than a suggestion. Ibis sat silent for several moments and Flame wondered if he was about to see a fight happened.

"Fine," the SandWing answered curtly. She threw one last dagger filled stare at Flame before storming out of the room in a huff. As soon as she left everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

Holy shit that was intense! Flame gently shook his wings to release some of the nervous energy that had been building up. Starfish seemed equally as agitated as he was rubbing his temples and letting out a deep sigh. When he saw Flame watching him he approached the SkyWing and clapped him on the back with his wing.

"We've gotten her off your case for now, but I don't think she'll let it go that easily," the SeaWing spoke with a bleak expression.

"I'll have a talk with her later," Zephyr offered. "But you will have to think of a punishment for Flame in the meantime."

The SeaWing sighed again. "I'll do it later. Flame, why don't you go spend the rest of the day with your friends and have some fun, eh? I am sure the kitchen will be fine tonight without your help."

Flame looked at Starfish with confusion and then towards Umber and the others. "Uh, sure, if you want me to." He shrugged. Starfish seemed pretty tense so Flame figured he should give the guy some space. He joined the others and they greeted him with a wan smiles.

Zephyr spoke to Sora. "I suppose we should get back to our session then, shall we?" She smiled and Sora grinned back. Zephyr dipped her head to Starfish and the two dragonesses left the office. Jet stepped out of the office to wave goodbye to her mother and friend.

"See you later, Sora!" she called down the hall and the males went out to join her.

Umber rubbed his neck. "Well, what should we do for the rest of the day?"

Jet snorted. "You guys go do whatever you want. SOME dragons still have to work for a living...and because their mother made them. I'll be at the front desk if you need me." She winked and bound off down the hall as well, leaving Umber and Flame alone. They shuffled their talons, both waiting for the other to say something first.

"So why did you fess up?" Flame finally asked and Umber cocked his head.

"What do you mean?"

Flame rolled his eyes. "Why did you tell Zephyr what you did? You guys could have gotten in big trouble. Why would you risk yourself?"

Umber stared at him like the answer was obvious. "Because you're my FRIEND. When the three of us got back this morning I saw Ibis dragging you towards Starfish's office so I knew you had been caught. It was just the right thing to do." Umber gave a lopsided smile.

"Well...thanks I guess," Flame said while trying to ignore Umber's adorableness. *AAAAAH WHY IS HE ALWAYS SO NICE ?*

"So...uh," Flame started. "Did you want to practice reading graphicolls again?"

Umber began to nod but was interrupted by a massive yawn. "Oh wow," he groaned. "Running around the palace all night is finally catching up to me...maybe you could just read them to me? I don't

think my brain is working well enough to learn anything."

Flame smirked. "Yeah, I guess I could do that."

"Great. So let's go to your room and get the scrolls," the brown dragon suggested and started down the hall.

"Um....I'll meet you there. I need to do something first," Flame called to Umber who responded with a puzzled but affirmative nod. With a sigh Flame re-entered Starfish office to see him sitting at his desks writing. Flame caught the Healers attention by clearing his throat and the SeaWing looked up and smiled.

"Hello Flame, I thought you went out with your friends."

"Oh, yeah, I'm meeting up with Umber to read graphicolls in a few minutes. But..." Flame approached the desk and stood before it. "I just wanted to say thanks. Thank you for being on my side against Ibis. That was really cool of you."

Starfish gave Flame a bright smile. "I have always been on your side, Flame. That's what I've been trying to prove to you this whole time."

Flame was touched by the SeaWing's words. "Anyway, thanks again." He returned Starfish's smile with his own and then departed to find Umber.

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After gathering some grapicolls Umber and Flame went to their usual reading spot in the garden. However, Flame was getting a bit worried about Umber. The MudWing was yawning after every second word and his wings drooped heavily.

"You know if you wanted to go back to your room and nap I won't be upset. You can barely keep your eyes open," Flame spoke as she sat down in the grass. Umber sat a few feet away, resting his head on his talons.

"No no, I'm fine," he insisted with droopy eyes. To be honest Flame was beginning to feel tired as well but for some reason he didn't
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want to go to bed. He wanted to sit in the garden and read to Umber.

"Just don't fall asleep or I'll set you on fire," Flame tried joked and Umber let out a quiet laugh. Flame took out one of the graphicolls and laid it down in the grass while Umber watched with weary eyes. The SkyWing began to read but then paused. "Can you see the pictures from over there?" he asked and Umber lifted his head.

"Don't worry about me," Umber smiled shyly. "I'll be fine. I can kinda see them from here."

Flame rolled his eyes. "Just shut up and get closer." *Seriously, looking at the pictures is the best part of reading graphicolls. If you can't even see images then what's even the POINT of reading them?*

Umber blushed for some reason. "Oh, well if you're sure."

What's he all nervous about? Does he think I'm going to bite or...

Flame froze as Umber sidled up against him so that the scales on their bodies brushed together and their wings touched. Umber must have heard Flame's sharp inhale of breath. "Sorry, is this too close?! I didn't mean to..."

"No it's fine," Flame quickly blurted out and cleared his throat to mask the heavy beating of his heart. *Shit, why am I blushing so much? It's just Umber for fuck's sakes. It's not like I am enjoying his soft, warm scales or....*

Flame slammed those thoughts away. "OK let's start reading!" he practically yelled out and then launched into the story so abruptly that Umber's closed eyes jolted open. For the next twenty minutes the boys sat comfortably in the garden as they dove into a world of superheroes and villains. There was a bit of a cool breeze that day and Flame was thankful to have Umber's warmth close by.

However, by the time Flame was moving on to the second gaphicoll Umber was beginning to nod off heavily. First his eyes closed and then his head would slowly lower until it rested against Flame's shoulder. Each time that happened Umber would jerk his head up

and mumbled an apology before repeating the whole thing again and again.

For this reason Flame was having a very hard time concentrating on reading. He kept glancing over to the dozing MudWing. The SkyWing's eyes trailed over Umber's jawline and then went to his mouth and finally over the burn mark at the end of the MudWing's nose. Flame had never noticed how fucking handsome Umber was.

After a few more minutes of reading the amber-eyed dragon finally succumbed to his exhaustion and fell asleep against Flame. Umber's soft breathing rustled the parchment of the graphicoll and Flame could feel the slow rise and fall of his chest against his own.

Fuck. Looks like I won't be able to leave anytime soon, Flame realized, although he wasn't all that upset. He rested his chin on his talon and began to silently read the graphicoll while Umber slumbered next to him. A cool breeze blew past and Umber stirred in his sleep, cuddling up closer to Flame.

Flame blushed furiously and his stomach filled with butterflies. *FUUUUUCK WHY AM I FREAKING OUT SO MUCH?* After a few moments the intense feeling went away but the exhaustion induced fog still hung over his brain. *Holy crap, I'm tired.*

A second cold gust swept by which caused Umber to frown and shiver in his sleep. *Wow, how sensitive can you be for a little wind to bother you?* Flame complained but then groaned at what he was about to do. *Honestly, the things I do for my "friends". Umber better appreciate this!* Carefully Flame extended his large wing and draped it over the sleeping dragon. Umber's face became serene once again and the shivering stopped.

Besides his mother, Flame couldn't remember the last time he had been this physically close to someone. It terrified and comforted him at the same time to have Umber so near. But what confused Flame the most were all these weird feelings rushing through him. Was this supposed to be what friendship felt like?

Yes of course, Flame spoke to himself. *We're just two friends, hanging out in the gardens and...keeping each other warm. Nothing strange*

happening. That's what friends are supposed *to do! At least I think so...*

He hadn't been friends with Umber all that long. Maybe a few weeks at most but despite the short time Flame believed they had gotten quite close. Well, at least in Flame's opinion they were close. Whether Umber realized this or not Flame DID like the MudWing's company and, perhaps more importantly, Flame WANTED to trust Umber. The MudWing had shown time and time again that he truly did care about Flame...for some reason. At first Flame had thought Umber was just using him or wanted something out of it, but Flame was beginning to realize this was not the case. And then there was this morning when Umber had risked his own ass to help Flame. Umber would have only done that if he truly cared about him.

He brushed these thoughts away and silently continued his reading but soon found his own head drooping as well. With a sigh Flame rubbed his eyes and bit back a yawn. He was starting to get a headache from lack of sleep and every time he closed his eyes he didn't want to open them again.

Finally he let out a huff. *Screw it.* And with that he rested his head on his talons and curled up his body around Umber before falling asleep.

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Umber felt warmth all around him as he was stirred from his sleep by someone poking him in the nose. In his half-unconscious state he mumbled the most reasonable thing that came to mind.

"Go away, Sora. It's not time to get up yet." He then snuggled in closer to the warm body next to him that smelled like cinnamon and other baking ingredients. *Wait...wasn't I just in the garden with Flame?* Umber stiffened. His eyes flew open and he immediately tried to stand up, but there was something soft covering his body and he stumbled back down on his face. Flame stirred next to him but didn't waken.

"Umber? Are you awake?" Jet asked. She retracted her talon from where she had been poking him in the nose. "Uh....am I interrupting something?" She wore a roughish grin and glanced back and forth
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between Umber and Flame.

Umber's face was hot with blush. He slowly lifted Flame's wing and stepped outside the circle that the SkyWing's body had formed around him. A kaleidoscope of butterflies erupted in his stomach as Jet lifted a suggestive eyebrow.

"N-no, nothing is going on. We just...were reading graphicolls and fell asleep and then you came along and woke me up and now we are standing here having this conversation about me explaining what is happening-"

"ARLIGHT, UMBER!" Jet huffed out a laugh. "Stop rambling. I just wanted to ask you-"

"Would you two SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Flame groaned and threw his wings over his head. Umber could see one of Flame's orange eyes cracking open to give them murderous glares.

Jet rolled her eyes. "Wow, he's so lovely when he just wakes up."

Umber bit back a laugh as he heard Flame growl and curl up into a tight ball.

"So what did you want to ask me?" Umber waited patiently for Jet to explain, but the sudden worried expression on her face made his stomach churn.

"It's about your sister," she said. The warm, fuzzy feelings in Umber's chest changed to icy dread.

"I can't find her anywhere."

Chapter14

Umber was so far beyond panicking that he had entered some sort of state that was a mixture of absolute dread and life-threatening fear. "I was worried this would happen! I KNEW Sora would be stressed by being here and now she's run off somewhere and this time I'm not with her!"

"Umber, calm down! Don't you think you're overreacting?" Flame asked as he chased after the MudWing.

"He's right, Umber," Jet surprisingly agreed as she jogged along. "We were up all night. She's probably just taking a nap somewhere."

The logical part of Umber's brain knew they had a point, but he had a gut feeling that they were wrong. If there was one thing Umber had learned while fighting in the war, it was to always trust your gut and right now his gut was FREAKING OUT.

The trio of dragons were making their way back to Umber and Sora's room to check if she was there. The door wasn't locked so Umber slid it open and rushed in. Empty. Sora wasn't there. Umber let out a dismayed exhale and turned to Jet. "Where did you say you two were supposed to meet again?"

Jet sighed. "She was supposed to meet me in the library after her session with my mother, but I waited for an hour and she never showed up. That's when I went to find you to see if you had seen her."

"I STILL think you're overreacting," Flame reiterated. "She could be napping in the gardens, or maybe she went to get something to eat. You're working yourself up for no reason." Flame's voice was uncharacteristically gentle as he spoke to Umber. To be honest Umber was thankful to have the SkyWing close by. He always managed to be able to calm Umber down in the worst of situations. As much as Umber hated to admit it, if Flame hadn't been there in

the haunted palace with him that night he probably would have fainted from fright.

Although neither of them had been brave enough to mention their intimate moment in the garden.

"No, you don't understand," Umber tried to explain. "Something's not right. I feel it in my stomach." He pointed significantly at his mid-section and the two SkyWing's stared at it in confusion.

"Oh, right, sure," Jet reluctantly acknowledged before adding a suggestion. "But just in case let's go and ask my mom if she has seen Sora."

The anxious and angry butterflies tumbling around in his stomach were turning it into a knot of dread. He felt a wing lightly brush against his. It was Flame.

"Come on, maybe Zephyr will know where your sister is and once we get that settled we can all go get some sleep and you can stop running around looking like a corpse."

Umber gasped and placed his talons on his face. "Do I really look that bad?" he inquired. If he looked as exhausted as he felt right now, then the answer was probably yes.

Flame blushed slightly and nonchalantly looked around to room. "Well, I mean, for someone who had nearly no sleep I guess you don't look as bad as you *could* have."

Umber furrowed his brow. Was that supposed to be a compliment?

"AHEM!" Jet cleared her throat obnoxiously. Silently the males followed Jet as they went to Zephyr's office. Luckily the Healer wasn't with a patient so they were welcomed to speak with her. Right away Umber asked if she had seen his sister but she shook her head.

"The last time I saw her was when she left my office. She was in a good mood and eager to meet with Jet," Zephyr described and then fixed Umber with a grave expression. "Is there something I should know about? Has something happened to Sora?"

"Don't worry, mom," Jet assured. "Umber is just a little worried because we can't find her, but she probably just went off to sleep somewhere."

Umber hid his peeved expression. He was more than a LITTLE worried and he had good reason to be! His instincts were screaming at him that something was wrong. He wanted to tell Zephry this, but he was a bit intimidated by the older female. Would she take him seriously if he didn't even have proof that something was wrong?

Zephyr clasped her talons in front of her snout and thought for a moment. "I don't want to take any risks here. A patient disappearing is something we take very seriously. I will ask the guards and the other workers here to keep an eye out for her."

Umber met Zephyr's eyes and he sent her a silent *thank you.* Zephyr nodded back at him.

"What's the big deal if a patient goes missing? I mean, I almost ditched a few sessions myself to sleep in...and it would have worked if Starfish hadn't shown up at my room to check on me," Flame complained as he was momentarily distracted from the issue at talon.

"It's a big deal because of the emotional and psychological state of some of these patients." Zephyr stood up from where she had been sitting at her desk and paced the room. "We cover very sensitive topics with our patients, topics that have caused them a lot of pain in the past. Our goal is to help them cope with these past traumas but sometimes they can relapse. In this case they often run away or perhaps try to hurt themselves." Zephyr's mouth twisted into a frown. "And the most troublesome part for a Healer is that anything can stimulate these relapses. Anything that reminds them of their trauma can be dangerous; it could have been something someone said, something they'd seen, or even a random memory popping up."

Umber coiled his tail nervously. *Could that have happened to Sora? But what could have upset her so much?*

"Sora has been doing so well since she arrived here," Zephyr noted quietly. "But that doesn't mean she can't relapse as well. If you don't find her by this evening let me know right away." She gently took Umber's talons in her own and gave them a reassuring squeeze.

"I will. Thanks," Umber said, and the trio of dragons left the SkyWing's office.

"See, Zephyr has everything under control," Flame insisted as they made their way down the hallway towards the staircase. Umber just gazed at the floor. He didn't feel any better. *I just need to find Sora and then everything will be alright.*

He felt Flame nudge him and they stopped walking. Jet was a little bit ahead but stopped as well and looked back at them with impatient confusion.

"You look like you're about to cry," the SkyWing mentioned. "There's no point worrying if you can't do anything about it."

"I know, I know! I just..." Umber felt terrible. He was exhausted, hungry, and worried sick for his sister. He suddenly became overwhelmed. Without thinking he rested his head against Flame's chest and released a shuddering sob. He had just felt the sudden need to be close to Flame for some reason. As they touched Umber felt the SkyWing stiffen and then relax shortly before a hesitant wing rested over his back.

"Uh...there, there," Flame tried to sooth and clumsily patted his wing against Umber. The MudWing chuckled and looked up.

"Wow, you're really good at this comforting stuff. Have you ever considered becoming a Healer?"

Flame gave him a coy smile. "Don't get sassy with me, MudWing! Just because you're tired doesn't give you the excuse to be rude."

"Really? Then what's your excuse?" Jet questioned the scarred dragon.

Flame let out a hiss but didn't reply and instead just pushed Umber forward with his wing. "Come on; let's get you something to eat.

That will probably make you feel better."

It was nearly noon and delicious aromas were rising from the kitchens. It smelled like barbequed pork and other rich meat dishes. Even though the worried knot in his stomach had not gone away, Umber couldn't help but crack a smile. The smell reminded him of the first time he and Flame had cooked together. When Flame had been SO mean and tricked him into thinking he would get kicked out.

It had actually been pretty funny.

"What are you smiling about?" Flame asked as they walked side by side.

Umber blushed. "Oh nothing, I was just thinking about you," he stated and then realized what he had just said. Both males cleared their throats awkwardly. *Great, now I have this THING between me and Flame to worry about.*

Umber wasn't stupid. Sure, he couldn't read scrolls but he could read dragons fairly well. He wasn't as good as Qibli of course, but he didn't need to be a brain surgeon to know something was going on between Flame and himself. All the tender touches and bashful silences, the way Umber felt his stomach do flips every time the SkyWing was close, and of course the way his heart would skip a beat when Flame entered the room.

He had also noticed how differently Flame treated him compared to others. Perhaps Flame just thought of him as a friend, but all the blushing the SkyWing did when Umber was around suggested otherwise.

Umber breathed deeply and exhaled. He had never expected to develop romantic feelings for Flame of all dragons. Of course, Umber had always considered him handsome, especially with that tough looking scar, but when they had first met Flame had been nothing but hostile.

Yet in the few weeks that have known each other that had changed. Flame had become his friend and opened up to him. The SkyWing

was also surprisingly sweet and gentle...in his own rough kind of way. Umber smiled to himself while thinking about all the things Flame had done for him, like teaching him to read and staying with him in the palace. He also grinned at the memories of them cooking together. The way Flame's eyes would light up while mixing the ingredients and "purposely" setting things on fire.

Umber snapped out of his thoughts as a dish of meat was placed before him by Flame. Without realizing it he had reached the cafeteria with the others and had been sat down at a table. Flame sat down beside him while Jet was seated across the table. She was already digging into her meal of delicious port and beef.

Umber looked down at his meal. It looked and smelled delicious and he KNEW he should eat. He hadn't eaten since yesterday, but his roiling stomach churned at the thought of swallowing anything. He was just too anxious.

"I'm not really hungry. I'll just eat later," he stated and pushed the plate away. Flame fixed him with a hard stare.

"Don't be stupid. Eat something. You'll feel better," Flame ordered and pushed the plate back towards Umber. The MudWing groaned as his stomach complained and he pushed it away again.

Flame growled. "Fine. Be that way." The SkyWing dropped the piece of meat he was holding and pushed his own plate away. "If you're not going to eat then I'm not either, which really fucking sucks because I'm STARVING but whatever." Flame folded his arms across his chest.

Umber rubbed his face in frustration. "Flame, don't be silly. I just don't feel all that well."

"I'm no Healer, but I don't think starving yourself is going to make it any better. So just EAT already because I am going to DIE if you don't." Flame waited in stubborn silence for Umber to eat something.

With an angry huff Umber picked up one of the steaks from his plate, took a bite, and put it back down. The meat hit his stomach

uneasily. Flame mirrored his actions and took a single bite of his own food and set it back down.

"Well that sure as hell didn't fill me up so I hope you plan on eating more than that!" The red dragon stared expectantly at Umber. *He can't be serious!* Umber convinced himself, studying Flame with a cocked eyebrow. *There is no way he would just* not *eat until I do.*

But that's exactly what Flame did and the two dragons sat in hungry silence until finally Umber surrendered.

"Ugh, FINE! I'LL EAT IT!" The MudWing snatched the meat of the plate and began gnawing on them while throwing Flame a spiteful stare. Surprisingly after the first few bits of food were swallowed Umber's stomach began to settle down and his appetite flicked on. In an instant his dish was clean.

Meanwhile Flame took his time eating, all while giving Umber a smug smile. He passed Umber a napkin. "I TOLD you it would make you feel better. Also it's good to see your table manners are just as shitty as they've always been."

Umber took the napkin, wiped his mouth with it, and threw it back at the SkyWing. Flame made a face of disgust and tried to dodge it but the napkin hit his wing and fell daintily to the ground. In retaliation Flame threw his own used napkin at Umber who was laughing too hard to move out of the way. Jet watched them with an unimpressed grimace.

The two of them continued to throw napkins at each other until one of the kitchen staff came over to tell them to stop. The boys bit their tongues trying not to laugh while they were scolded.

It was true that eating something had made him feel better, but he was still worried about Sora. Once again his mind returned to his problems as he noted that she hadn't shown up for lunch which was very unusual. Not to mention that anxious feeling in the pit of his stomach had not budged at inch. Sora was in trouble and he knew it.

Jet had to excuse herself since she had some errands to run. "Try

not to worry, alright?" she comforted Umber and, with that, left the two males alone.

"Listen, Flame," Umber started once Jet was out of hearing range. "You should go and get some sleep. I think I'm going to go look around for Sora for a while."

Flame rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. If I hadn't been with you today you would have starved yourself. There's no telling what other stupid stuff you'll get into without me around. So just shut up and tell me how I can help."

How am I supposed to shut up and tell him what to do at the same time? Umber contemplated as the two left the cafeteria.

The SkyWing peered around the garden as they walked. "So where do you want to start looking?"

The MudWing shrugged. "I suppose we could check her favourite spots in the library and gardens...maybe she's in the art center. I think at one point she mentioned that she wanted to check it out." Umber threw out these suggestions but deep down he knew it was more than just some sort of miscommunication.

Zephyr's explanation about relapsing had resonated with him. Sora wasn't the forgetful type or the kind of dragon to just spontaneously do something else when he had promised to be somewhere. There had to be a good reason for her disappearing, but as they turned the corner to stroll down the stone pathway Umber saw something that made him stop in his tracts. It was right then and there that Umber knew what had caused his sister's disappearance.

Walking towards them was Princess Icicle.

Chapter 15

~Earlier that day~

It was early afternoon when Sora left Zephyr's office. Despite her exhaustion she was still exhilarated from the exciting romp around the haunted palace last night. The adrenalin hadn't worn off yet but she knew sometime later today she would probably crash and sleep for a week.

She smiled. *I'll just deal with that when the time comes.* Right now she was on her way to meet Jet in the library. An electrifying energy ran through her at the thought of meeting her friend. Jet just made everything better.

She had just left the cafeteria and was on the roofed walkway that led to the north-most building when, from the corner of her eyes, she saw a flash of white that made her heart stop. It had been a quick shimmer of ice-coloured scales that had disappeared behind a bush.

Imagines of Crane's limp body falling from the sky flashed in her mind followed by the grinning face of Icicle. The IceWing's sharp teeth sparkled as she met Sora's gaze and her eyes were wild with blood-lust.

Sora shuddered and quickly performed the visualization technique Zephyr had showed her to calm herself. She imagined herself sinking into a warm bath of mud. First she envisioned her talons stepping into the dirt, focused on the sound the mud made when squished and how it wrapped around her toes. She did this for the rest of her body until she reached her head. She released a sigh as her head became clear.

Icicle isn't here. That was just one of the other IceWings patients. You are safe.

When she had first arrived at the Healing Center Sora had nearly panicked every time she saw an IceWing but now she was finally becoming accustomed to seeing them around.

But this time something was off. A cold shill was rushing up and down her spine as it often did when danger was nearby. Acting on a hunch Sora carefully followed where she had seen the IceWing disappear.

It's probably not Icicle, I'm being silly! But...just to make sure....

The dragon had vanished behind a rosebush but had not gotten far. About four meters away from where Sora was hiding the IceWing was standing by a bed of tulips, sketching the vibrant flowers on a piece of parchment. Sora exhaled in relief. It wasn't Icicle.

After a few moments Sora finally did recognize the IceWing though. It was the IceWing that had fought with Flame. Sora remembered him being fierce and angry when she had first met him but now he seemed calm and tranquil. Silently he drew the flowers and watched with great interest when a bee landed on one.

Sora shook her head. *I knew I was being silly. Jet's probably wondering where I am now, I should go before...*

"Hey! You there! I require directions," A high-pitched haughty voice called out. Sora inhaled sharply and ducked into the bush she had been hiding behind. *I know that voice!* She realized with horror.

The sketching dragon must have recognized it too for he dropped his parchment in shock and whipped his body around. He immediately dove into a low bow. "Princes Icicle!" His astounded voice shook and the spectre of Sora's nightmares stepped in her vision.

Icicle looked as strong and dangerous as ever. She held her head up high and looked down at the bowing IceWing with contempt but when she spoke Sora couldn't hear a thing. Her heart was pounding so hard her ears were ringing.

One after another visions flashed before her eyes: Crane's death,

Carnelian and Bigtail's burnt bodies, Tamarin lying unconscious in a bed, and finally the night when her and Umber had frantically run away. When the visions were done only one thought crossed her mind: *She's here to kill me. She figured out where I was and came here to take revenge!*

Sora hurried through the gardens as fast as she could run. Her legs felt like jelly and her heart was pounding so hard it hurt.

Of course she would come to kill me. How could I be so STUPID to think my past wouldn't catch up with me?

Sora continued to run, she had no idea where she was going, she just knew had to get as far away from Icicle as possible. As the fear took over so too did the self-loathing and anger.

I deserve this, she spat in her mind, tears beginning to bead on her lashes. *How could I ever think I would just be able to live a normal life after what I did? I'm so sorry, Umber. I'm sorry I ruined everything.* The tears were flowing freely now, blurring her vision. Unable to see where she was going she collided into a dragon.

Sora went to blurt out an apology but swallowed her words when she saw the icy scales of another IceWing. Deep down Sora knew it wasn't the Princess, but in her panicked state all IceWings were Icicle. Letting out a yelp she ran away, ignoring the concerned cries from behind.

With nowhere else to run she took to the sky. Her thoughts were erratic and fearful, but every instinct in her body was telling her to run. After taking one last look at the Healing Center from above she turned and fled.

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~Present~

Umber was struck frozen with shock as Icicle walked towards them. Luckily she hadn't noticed him. She was too busy rolling her eyes and gazing around the gardens with obvious displeasure.

Finally Umber's sense came back and he tackled a swearing Flame
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behind a nearby hedge and carefully peeked through the foliage as Icicle passed by. *This can't be happening!*

His breathing was becoming erratic as he realized Sora was in greater danger than he had thought. *I have to find her before Icicle does! Maybe we can return to the Mud Kingdom. Queen Moorhen would surely understand if we told her Icicle showed up. But what is she even DOING here? They wouldn't have sent her to this facility when Sora was here at the same time, would they?*

"Umber?" Flame voice startled Umber and he flinched. "Isn't that the dragon that Sora...you know..."

"Tried to kill?" Umber offered. "Yes."

There was a pause. "Oh fuck," Flame eventually breathed.

Umber nodded in agreement. By now Icicle was out of sight, having entered the Center Building a few moments ago. On shaky legs Umber stood. His heart was pounding and he felt like vomiting out all the contents in his stomach. He whipped around to face Flame.

"We HAVE to find Sora! But Icicle CANNOT know I am here or she'll know Sora is here too. Please, Flame, if Icicle were to-"

"UMBER! It's going to be alright. I'll help you...even though I have no idea how," he admitted. Umber was just as lost in terms of what their next action should be, but he felt relieved to know Flame was with him.

The MudWing began to pace. "We should...try and find Sora, NO WAIT maybe we should go tell Zephyr first or....tell the guards?" The panic was messing with his mind as he struggled to think of what they should do first.

"I say we should go to Zephyr. I think she would want to know if the arch nemesis of her patient showed up."

Despite the serious situation Umber let out a low laugh. "Really? *Arch nemesis*? Icicle is not a supervillain, Flame."

Flame threw his talons up helplessly. "I just call 'em how I see 'em."

With great haste the two dragons left the garden and carefully entered the Center Building. Flame went ahead of Umber to act as a lookout for Icicle. Flame signaled that the path was clear and the two scuttled through the cafeteria and up the stairs. Without thinking Umber burst into Zephyr's room and scared the scales off of Zephyr and Jet. The two dragonesses had been looking over some papers that all went flying when Umber had yanked open the door.

Umber murmured and apology as Zephyr put a talon to her chest and let out a breath. "Umber, what in Pyrrhia is wrong?"

"It's Icicle! She's here! In the Healing Center!" he blurted out in short pants.

Jet gasped and Zephyr sucked in a breath. "WHAT? She's not supposed to be within 100 meters of this place!" the Healer exclaimed and abruptly stood from her desk, smoke coiling from her nostrils. "Where did you last see her?" she asked and Umber took a moment to realize she was speaking to him.

"Oh! Uh, she had just entered the Center building."

Without another word Zephyr flew out of the room.

Jet jumped up from her seat and nudged herself between Flame and Umber.

"Wow! She hasn't been this upset since I started that food fight a few years ago. Come on, I bet she's going to tear apart that snobby ice witch!" Jet leaped out of the room in hot pursuit.

As Flame and Umber followed, Umber couldn't help but smirk. "I didn't know you hated Icicle so much, Jet. Have you ever meet her?"

Jet slowed into a trot and tilted her head side to side as she thought. "Well, I never actually MET her. But I know Sora is afraid of her, and as Sora's BEST FRIEND it is my duty to hate her guts."

Umber didn't bother to argue with that logic.

Eventually the three young dragons caught up to the SkyWing

Healer as she approached the spa area on the other side of the cafeteria.

The walls surrounding the spa were perforated with large archways that allowed the summer breeze to enter and rustle the blue, silky curtains that were draped between the columns. Zephyr rushed up to a befuddled SeaWing receptionist that was stationed between two fountains.

"Has an IceWing by the name of Icicle passed by here recently?" she demanded and the SeaWing blinked at her.

"Well...an IceWing *did* enter the spa but I didn't catch her name. She just kind of...glared at me and strutted in all snootily!" she answered Zephyr.

"Yep, that sounds like Icicle," Umber affirmed and unconsciously ducked behind Flame.

"Is she still there now?" the Healer asked but the receptionist just shrugged. Zephyr exhaled a long breathe from her nose.

She turned to the trio. "I'm going to go in and find her, I want you three to go and wait for me in my office. There has obviously been some miscommunication and I am about to set it right."

With that she walked past the receptionist and into a large, open area that was divided into small rooms by more silk curtains. They were lined up side by side making a hallway. Some of the drapes were pulled aside and Umber could see they hid message tables and therapy rooms. He tried to go forward to get a better look but the SeaWing stopped him.

"Sorry, you have to have an appointment to enter. We can't have dragons wandering around ruining the relaxing atmosphere." She then returned to her desk and began to file her talons.

Umber turned to his friends and shrugged. "So are we going to go wait in Zephyr's office for her to come back? Maybe when she's done she can help us find Sora."

"Yeah, we *could* do that." Jet shot a wary glance towards the

SeaWing and then brought her head in closer towards the two males who leaned forward in response. She spoke in a whisper. "OR we could eavesdrop."

Flame perked. "You know another way in?"

She gave a wolfish smile and her eyes sparkled. "Oh yes. I know EVERYTHING that goes on in this place."

"I'm game," Flame commented with a shrug and Umber just stared at the two trouble-makers with disbelief.

"WHAT! Don't you think it would be best to stay AWAY from the dragon that wants my sister dead?" Umber fluttered his wings in alarm. In addition to the vengeful IceWing strutting around, his stomach was still twisted in worried knots while every fiber of his being was practically screaming at him to go and find Sora.

He felt Flame's smooth scales brush against his as the SkyWing sat next to him. Umber's pulse quickened at the contact as he desperately waited for Flame to say something reassuring.

"Don't be such a sissy."

Umber withheld a disappointed sigh at the less-than-reassuring response.

"Don't you remember how in Issue 2 the superheroes had to sneak into Lord Evil's lair to figure out what his plan was? Just imagine that's what we're doing now," he suggested. Umber gave him a withering look.

"Flame!" Umber argued. "That was in a *graphicoll.* We're dealing with a REAL dragon that just so happens to be the ICEWING PRINCESS that tried to KILL MY SISTER and is no doubt still angry about the whole thing." Umber paused for breath. "And you STILL think it's a good idea to stick our snouts where she could see me and figure out that Sora is here?"

Flame opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again. Finally he shrugged. "Any information is better than none."

"And," Jet rushed over to join their conversation, "maybe we can find out what she's doing here."

There were still hundreds of reasons not to do this, but Umber had to admit the SkyWings had a point. Still, he hesitated.

"I...I don't know...maybe I should just wait-"

Umber's sentence dropped as Flame leaned closer. The MudWing inhaled sharply.

"Come on Umber, you know I would never let anything bad happen to you," he breathed and the intensity of his warm gaze made Umber blush.

"I...fine, I'll come," he acquiesced. Flame sat back with a triumphant smile and Jet grinned.

"Alright, follow me and stay close," she announced and then silently stalked out of the building, keeping low to the ground with Flame not far behind.

With great apprehension Umber followed his jubilant friends as they slinked through the garden like alligators in murky water. It was actually pretty funny watching them duck behind bushes and run from one hiding spot to another. Umber couldn't help but smirk. They were taking this "spying" thing WAY to seriously.

Umber soon realized that Jet was leading them towards the cafeteria. Flame picked up on this as well.

"Are we stopping for a fucking snack or something? I thought we were spying?" His complaint made Jet's ears twitch but she answered calmly.

"There is a back entrance on this side. We'll have to go through the bathhouse though."

Umber's twitched his tail with interest. Sora had mentioned the bath-house once while reading the welcome package and the sibs had been meaning to try out the mud baths. As they entered the cafeteria, the loud chatter from the dinning residents was enough to

hide their presence. However, Jet sill felt the need to whistle in an out of tune pitch as she casually sidled up to the blue dividing drapes between the cafeteria and spa. She approached one near the end of the building and whisked it aside, looked around cautiously, then disappeared behind it.

Flame cocked a brow and met Umber's eyes with a shrug. Making sure no one was looking, the two males approached the spot where Jet had vanished and stepped behind the drapes. Surprisingly there was a wall behind the curtains, but at this specific spot there was dragon sized panel that could be pushed out to make an entrance. Jet had left it open to allow Umber and Flame to follow.

As soon as they passed through the door Umber's senses were assaulted by warm, sticky steam that hung in his lungs like smoke. The room was humid and moist, but after a few moments of acclimation Umber found it pleasant. Living in a swamp can be humid and moist, and the steam in this room had hints of mint and lavender in them. It was quite relaxing.

Beside him Flame began coughing. "IT'S HORRIBLE IN HERE!" he choked out before flapping his wings to dissipate the mist.

"This is the steam room...if you haven't already guessed," Jet informed dryly and through the fog Umber could make out her pinkish scales at the other side of the room. She opened a door and a burst of fresh, clean air entered. Umber heard Flame suck in a deep breath.

"Areas like these have to be walled off so the heat doesn't escape...or the cold, it depends on the room." Jet kept the door opened as Umber and Flame went through. The entered into a large, round room with blue tiled flooring. All around them were more doors that probably led to different bathing areas. One of these doors probably joined with the hallway that led to the receptionist.

"Keep the cold in?" Umber echoed and Jet nodded.

"Yeah, we have ice rooms for the IceWings to *chill* out in." Jet smiled at her clever joke, but when neither Umber nor Flame

reacted she frowned but finished her explanation. "ANYWAY there is something for every tribe. There are salt water baths, pure water baths, ice baths, sand baths, and mud baths."

Flame grimaced. "Those all sound terrible."

Jet flicked her tail. "Well just because YOU don't bathe doesn't mean others can't enjoy them."

"I DO *SO* BATHE!" Flame blew smoke from his nose.

"Then why do you smell so-"

"Would you two stop arguing?" Umber stepped between a bristling Flame and a smug Jet. "We are TRYING to find Icicle as discretely as possible to figure out why she is here."

The SkyWings backed off and mumbled an apology. Umber sighed. "Let's just find your mother and Icicle," he directed at Jet.

"Right, that door should take us back to the main Spa area." She pointed to the door that was on the other side of the room, opposite to the steam room. Leading the way, Umber traversed the round room and went to push the doors open but someone on the other side opened them before he did.

It was Icicle.

She entered without looking and nearly toppled into him. She backtracked last minute and was about to say something derogatory but paused as her gaze fell on Umber. They stood frozen, staring at each other and Umber held his breath. After a few moments her eyes narrowed with recognition.

"YOU!" she screeched at Umber. "YOU'RE SORA'S BROTHER!"

Chapter 16

Well shit. This wasn't part of the plan, Flame noted dryly.

Somehow they had managed to find Icicle before Zephyr, and NO one was pleased about it.

The IceWing slowly entered the threshold to the circular room. Her eyes, like scalding ice and screams, never left Umber's face as if she hoped her gaze alone would strangle him so she wouldn't have to actually touch the disgusting creature.

Meanwhile the brown dragon was folding his wings tight against his body in an act of submission. "I...uh," Umber struggled to reply as the IceWing continued to bare down on him. Flame felt his rage blossom and he leaned against Umber protectively.

"Piss off, IceWing," Flame growled. It only pissed him off further that Icicle paid no attention to him. With the grace of a falling snowflake she confidently sauntered closer and Flame was practically choking on her smug aura.

"That must mean your crazy, murderous sister is around here as well," she snorted and gazed down at Umber condescendingly. "No wonder Queen Snowfall was hesitant to send me here. This place is unsafe with that *lunatic* running around."

Flame felt Umber stiffen beside him and his nostrils flared. Flame readied himself for a fight. If Umber wanted to take down this bitch then he would be right beside him.

Instead the MudWing took a deep breath, his voice turning desperate. "P-please, Icicle. My sister was sick when she tried to kill you, she wasn't thinking right. But she's getting better now. Can't we put all this behind us?" he implored with forced confidence.

Flame blinked. He felt warm admiration grow in his chest as he

looked at Umber. This was shortly followed by guilt. *My first reaction was to fight her, but he wanted to make peace.* Flame sighed. *How come I can't be like that?*

Icicle's hiss broke into his thoughts.

"She isn't *sick*." Her voice was claws against his eardrum. "She's *weak*. She couldn't handle the war so she threw a hissy fit and went berserk, resulting in the deaths of innocent dragons." Icicle shook her head and her horns rattled together in agreement. "It would have been safer for everyone if she had just been executed."

Flame staggered to the side as Umber flared his wings and stood tall, but whatever he was going to say was interrupted by Jet.

"How DARE you talk about Sora like that!" she roared and strutted forward so that her snout was almost touching Icicle's. They were the same height so Jet's furious orange eyes met Icicle's indifferent blues.

"And who are you supposed to be?" The IceWing blew a gust of flurries from her nose and into Jet's face.

Jet growled. "I'm Sora's FRIEND and you are SO wrong about her. She the strongest dragon I know in body, mind, and soul. No one should have gone through what she did." Jet nodded to finish her point.

"Well *I* was in the war and I turned out fine!" Icicle pointed out and Flame exchanged a skeptical glance with Umber before Icicle continued. "A *true* dragon is able to handle combat; we weren't hatched with talons and teeth to pick flowers. If a dragon crumples into a ball of erratic emotions every time they fight, then they are worthless. They are a waste of life. That is why places like *this* disgust me." Her face twisted in repulsion as she motioned with her tail around the room, but it was implied she meant more than just the bath-house. "This *Healing Center*. It's full of worthless pansies. A true warrior wouldn't need to run to some therapist to talk about their delicate feelings."

Silence fell over the group as her words settled over them like a

toxic mist. Jet put a talon over her mouth in hurt shock while Umber shook his head sadly.

Flame's anger had been steadily increasing through the whole conversation. *Well, Umber's approach didn't work. Now it's time for mine.*

"Fuck off, ice-bitch," he spat, a low growl building up in his throat. "Why don't you haul that hoity-toity ass back to the Ice Kingdom and leave us alone."

This time Icicle heard him. In an instant Icicle was an inch away from Flame's snout. "*What* did you just call me you ugly peasant?"

Flame released a coil of smoke from his nose and blew it into Icicle's face. She coughed and backed off.

"Oh, do you need me to repeat it more slowly?" he jeered. "I SAID: Fuck. Off. Ice. BITCH."

Icicle's eyes glistened with rage and she whipped her tail back and forth. Flame automatically went into a defensive position should she attack but felt a talon touch his chest and a warm body lean against him. He looked down to see Umber trying to get his attention. In that moment Flame forgot about Icicle and could only see the MudWing and his gorgeous amber-flecked eyes.

"Don't provoke her," he advised. "Let's just wait until Zephyr gets here to deal with her."

Flame hesitated. He REALLY wanted to punch Icicle in the face. However, he also didn't want to make Umber upset.

In the end he chose the option that would make Umber happy.

Flame looked at Umber and exhaled deeply through his nose, releasing the tension in his shoulders. "Yeah, you're right."

Flame turned back to Icicle and saw her glittering blue eyes watching them intently. Watching how Umber touched Flame, how Flame reacted to the MudWing and how close their bodies were. She smiled maliciously.

"Oh, I remember you now." Her voice lilted with contempt as she spoke to Flame. "You're that pathetic, deformed SkyWing that was always moping around and yelling at everyone."

Sparks flew in Flame's vision and he surged forward but was held back by Umber.

"Go fuck yourself!" he yelled but this only seemed to make Icicle more amused.

"Leave him alone!" Umber snarled, much to everyone's surprise. He entwined his tail with Flame's as an act of support and the SkyWing blushed fiercely.

Icicle rolled her eyes. "Relax, MudWing. It would be a waste of my time fighting your *boyfriend*." She inspected her serrated talons with feint disinterest before sliding Flame a sly grin.

Flame stiffened but didn't pull away from Umber. "I...don't be stupid. Umber and I are just friends and...yeah...right Umber?" He looked at the MudWing, but Umber hesitated.

"W-well...actually, Flame..."

Flame's breath hitched. His entire body felt hot as he waited for Umber to finish his sentence. *What does he mean by that? We are just friends, aren't we? But...does this mean he...* The implications sent Flame's head spinning in the most wonderful way but the moment was shattered by Icicle's shrill scoff that sounded like a wheezing crow.

"The only thing I hate more than a pathetic romance is a pathetic romance involving pathetic dragons."

Flame was still too flustered to respond with a decent insult so he simply let Umber usher him towards the exit. "Come on, Flame. We don't need to listen to this."

Icicle watched them leave with a triumphant pose. As Jet walked by, she paused in front of the IceWing and gave her a sarcastic dip of the head. Her voice was nothing but pleasant as she said, "I hope you have a miserable life and die alone you heartless monster."

Icicle responded with the same level of politeness. "And I hope you're killed in a painful and slow accident you worthless peasant."

Wow, and I thought MY insults were good, Flame mused as the two females verbally wrecked each other.

Just as he was about to exit the round chamber Icicle said something that made them pause.

"Wait a moment... why are *you* here. You weren't even in the war," Icicle addressed Flame. "Why would *you* need to be at a Healing Center?"

Flame swallowed hard and fear prickled along his spine. "It's n-none of your business," he snapped, trying to sound fierce and confident but failing miserably. *Just shut up. Please just shut up. Don't ask me any more questions about this!* Flame could feel the nauseating guilt crawling through his gut, threatening to explode and send him reeling with it. Every time Stonemover was mention or implied it surged forward as if it had been lying in wait.

"We should leave," Flame insisted and began to push Umber towards the door. He could feel his anger brimming and he needed to get out quick. He couldn't let Umber see him like that again. But Icicle's chilled voice froze them.

"Ooooh, wait a minute," She mused. "I think I remember hearing something about you recently..."

Fuck.

"You're here because you tried to kill Stonemover, right?"

Flame stopped and spun around with a wild snarl. "Shut up," he hissed through clenched teeth. But it was too late; the furious shame was already spreading through his body, sliding along his blood like burning lead. It was hot and heavy, filling every inch of him a primal rage. He could feel it coming but didn't know how to stop it. *Please, not like this. Not in front of Umber. How did she even find out? She wasn't even there!*

Icicle blinked in surprise at the passionate reaction, but then smiled.

She had found his weakness.

"You liar! Flame would never do that...right, Flame?" Umber was beside him now. Flame felt dizzy as the rage quickly turned into dread and panic.

"I...it's...I can explain...I didn't mean to it was just, HE LIED TO ME, and..." As Flame tried to explain the expression of horror on Umber's face became more prominent. Flame couldn't bear to look.

Icicle had her tail wrapped around her body and wore the vilest grin Flame had ever seen. His talons twitched as he envisioned himself clawing off her face.

"If I recall correctly, Darkstalker saved his life. If he hadn't of been there, Stonemover would be dead and *you'd* be a murderer," Icicle added sweetly. Flame felt sick to his stomach as she sauntered around him like a hunter playing with her wounded prey.

"There are a lot of rumours going around about you, you know," she said to Flame. "A lot of different theories about what made you snap. Would you like to know what *I* think?"

"I SAID SHUT UP!" He pitifully screamed and leapt at Icicle. She easily dodged him and whipped her tail across his face below his right eye as he dashed past. His talons scratched against the tiled floor as he skidded to a halt.

He winced as a stinging sensation burst across his face followed by a sticky warmth that dripped from the wound. Using the back of his talons Flame wiped the oozing blood off his face. In an instant Umber was beside him. "Are you alright?" he demanded but Flame pushed him away. Tears were beginning to fall and he didn't want Umber to see.

Icicle continued her narrative. "I think he did it because he's a vain coward that lost his mommy's love by being so ugly."

Flame couldn't find his voice to respond. He was choking trying to hold his sobs in. *She's right. She's fucking right.*

"WHAT IS GOING ON IN HERE?"

Everyone turned to the main door where Zephyr stood. She exhaled a puff of smoke through her nose as she glared at Flame, Jet, and Umber. Flame quickly tried to wipe his tears away. "I told you three to go to my office and wait there."

"Oh, oops! This isn't your office! Wow, silly me. We must have gotten lost." Jet gave her most innocent smile as she fibbed. Zephyr closed her eyes and took several deep, calming breathes. When she opened them again her eyes met with Flame's and her forehead creased.

"Flame, why are you bleeding? Who did this to you?" In an instant Zephyr was in front of him. She grabbed his chin and turned his head to inspect his wound. Flame pulled away.

"I'm fine. It's nothing," he snapped. The rage had somewhat relaxed its grip, but the shame and guilt were stronger than ever. Umber was still trying to make eye contact but Flame refused. He didn't want face the MudWing's disappointment.

Zephyr continued to stare at him for several moments before glancing briefly at Icicle and then to the smear of blood on the IceWing's tail-tip. "I see," the Healer said, putting the pieces together. "I can handle Icicle from here, perhaps you should go to the Clinic. It's on the third floor in the Center Building."

Flame gave a weak nod and pushed past Zephyr. He kept his gaze on the ground, refusing to look at anyone. He just needed to get away from them all.

Flame had just passed the receptionist desk when Umber came sprinting up to meet him. "Wait! Flame, I'll go with you," he offered in his typical friendly way.

"No," Flame barked. He could still feel the anger settling in his bones, not yet dissipated. It was dormant but active, simply sitting in wait for something else to jump at. Flame would make sure it didn't get Umber. "I just want to be left alone right now." Without waiting for a response Flame continued forward without looking back.

"Please don't push me away again."

Umber's voice was quiet. Pleading. It made Flame stop in his tracks. The MudWing used this pause to catch up to the SkyWing. "I'm your friend, Flame. I WANT to help you, but I can only do that if you let me." He wrapped his tail around Flame's. Releasing a shaking breath, Flame closed his eyes and took in Umber's warmth. It calmed him.

"So does this mean you don't hate me?" Flame finally asked. He had to know upfront if Umber didn't want to be his friend anymore.

"Why would I hate you?"

"Because of what I tried to do...to Stonemover." Flame swallowed hard. Even just saying the animus' name made him queasy.

Umber didn't answer right away. He leaned against Flame's shoulder and let out a shaky laugh. "Well, I have no right to judge you. I fought in the war, my talons have been stained with blood too..." Umber drifted off with a dark expression, lost in thought, but then quickly shook his head and continued what he was saying. "Besides, what's done is done. It's in the past now. All we can do now is move forward and learn from our mistakes."

Flame smiled and wiped a few lingering tears off of his face. "You make it sound so simple."

Umber sighed and nestled closer; their bodies molding together as one. "I know it's not simple, and I realize it's been hard for you but...I just want you to know I'll always be there." He paused and smiled. "Even if you don't want me to be."

Flame twisted his neck to rest his head over Umber's. "Yeah, I know."

They sat in content silence for a while until Umber spoke.

"I know you probably don't want to talk about Stonemover right now, but if ever do...well, you know where to find me."

Flame opened his eyes and lifted his head off of Umber. "Thanks,

but you're right. I don't want to talk about right now. But... I just want you do know that I regret doing it," he admitted and for the first time since the fight with Icicle, Flame look in Umber's eyes. He was shocked to see nothing but kindness and warmth.

Umber smiled. "Yeah, I know."

Flame felt all the anger melt away as they sat there together. The peace lasted for a total of five second before Jet came barreling into them. She poked her head between theirs and threw her wings over their shoulders. She was grinning ear to ear. "Icicle is in SO MUCH TROUBLE! She's going to get sent back to the Ice Kingdom and has been banished from attending this Healing Center." Jet didn't even try to conceal her joy.

Umber exhaled a deep sigh of relief. "That's good to hear. I don't know what we would have done if she ended up staying." Umber paused. "Although why she was here in the first place is still a mystery."

"From what she told my mother, she had apparently heard Queen Snowfall debating about sending her here so she decided to torment us all with her irritating presence by dropping in to see what the this place was like." Jet grimaced but then let out a smile. "But I don't think she'll be coming back here anytime soon," she sang.

Flame smirked. "Serves that bitch right. Although, it was lucky Zephyr showed up when she did because I was about to smash her face into the ground." He flexed his sharp talons and envisioned them slicing Icicle across her pompous snout. Umber and Jet exchanged a dubious expression.

Flame snorted and didn't bother defending himself. *He* knew he could take on Icicle and that's all that mattered.

"So what are we gonna do next? Did you want to go and find your sister?" Flame asked the others. Umber frowned.

"I thought we were taking you to the clinic."

"Pfft. It's just a little scratch. I'll be fine." Flame swished his tail

impatiently.

When Umber continued to frown Flame rolled his eyes and threw his large wing around the MudWing, pulling him in close. "I thought you *liked* my scars?" he teased, leaning in towards his friend.

Umber's eyes grew wide and the brown scales of his face became swathed tones of red. "Um, I do. I just...maybe...I mean..." His mess of a sentence dropped away as Umber melted into the embrace, blushing intensely. It was probably the most adorable thing Flame had ever seen in his entire existence. Flame suddenly remembered the hesitation in Umber's response when Icicle had claimed they were 'just friends'. With a pounding heart the SkyWing cleared his throat and removed his wing from around Umber. Thankfully Jet decided to not comment on the scene.

"I agree with Flame, let's go find Sora," She opined, raking the ground with her talons to release her anxious energy. Flame couldn't help but wonder if Jet was more worried about Sora than she was letting on.

"The longer we wait, the harder it will be to find her," Flame pointed out.

Umber looked torn. The MudWing gave a worrisome glance at Flame's wound and then released a sigh. "Well, if you're sure you don't need to go to the clinic then I would really like to start searching. But we have NO idea where she is," he bemoaned.

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance."

The trio of dragons spun around to see a female IceWing approaching. At a first glance Flame had assumed it was Icicle. This IceWing had the same gleaming silver scales of the Princess, but this female was much older and larger. Additionally, the scales at the base if her horns and at the tips of her tail and wings were a deep navy blue that faded to a lighter shade as it spread across her body. It was as if her scales had slowly run out of dye while trying to colour her in.

"Well, that depends," Flame spoke. "Who the hell are you?"

Umber nudged Flame hard in the rib. "Don't be rude!" he hissed.

The IceWing dipped her head. "Of course, allow me to introduce myself. I am Ursa, a Soul Healer here at the Center. I couldn't help but overhear your conversation and I believe I have some information that could help you."

"Oh." Flame inspected her once more. "Well I guess you can help us then."

Umber gave him a hard look and turned to Ursa. "Sorry about him. But, what do you mean you can help us? Do you know where my sister went?"

Quickly Ursa explained how, earlier that morning, she had a run in with a frantic young female and had watched her fly off in a panic. She didn't know who the dragoness was until she overheard them talking about finding a MudWing. The IceWing did her best to describe the young dragoness, despite the brief encounter, but it was enough for Umber to jump to attention.

"Yes, that is my sister! Which direction did she go in?"

The IceWing Healer pointed a talon towards the palace and adjoining mountain. "She flew towards the abandon parts of the castle." Ursa's wings drooped. "I would have followed her myself but I had to meet with a patient...also she was pretty terrified of me for some reason."

"Oh, that's just because you kind of look like the IceWing Princess she tried to kill and - OW!" Flame was cut off by another hard jab in the ribs from Umber.

The MudWing ignored Flame's cursing. "Thank you so much! You have no idea how helpful this is," he gushed and the IceWing dipped her head again and left.

"It looks like were going back to the abandoned palace," the brown dragon declared and then let out a sigh. "It's a pretty huge place though, and the sun's already beginning to set."

Flame turned to the horizon and saw that Umber was correct. The sun was making it's descent in the sky, casting long shadow all over the gardens.

"Then we better get started. I'm NOT losing another night's sleep running around that damn palace," Flame informed, although, truthfully, he would stay up all night and more if that's what it took to make Umber happy again.

Jet, who had been staring at her talons thoughtfully, quickly perked. "It won't take us all night. I think I know where she went!"

Chapter 17

Sora sat defeated on a small ledge along the mountain's face, overlooking the Healing Center. From where she was the massive complex looked like a grain of rice and the dragons were nothing more than grains of sand. She let out a shaky sigh.

She had meant to keep flying, to go far away, but for some reason she had flown back here. To the forlorn palace that held nothing but ghosts and the whispers of wind. Perhaps it was because, deep down, she knew she had nowhere else to go. The Healing Center was the only place she belonged; anywhere else they would just treat her like a criminal.

Sora's chest convulsed as she held back another sob. She had already spent all her tears and at this point it was useless. She had learned long ago that crying wouldn't fix what she did. It wouldn't bring Carnelian and Bigtail back from the dead... or Crane.

And it wouldn't get rid of her failures. She shut her eyes tightly in hot shame as she thought of how disappointed Zephyr, Jet, and Umber would be. She could just imagine Umber's reaction. He would smile warmly, tell her it's alright and that he loves her no matter what, but deep down he would be terrified that Sora had snapped again.

While it wasn't always obvious, there were times when Sora knew Umber was hiding his true feelings from her. He did that a lot. Always putting a proud and loving face forward, protecting her from his doubts and fears.

He thinks I'm so fragile, Sora thought sourly, followed by a self-mocking laugh. *Maybe I am. All it took was one look at Icicle and I fled like a coward. And I had been doing so well! s*he lamented, remembering the progress her and Zephyr had made together. *I was looking forward to returning to the Mud Kingdom, to seeing my sibs again and FINALLY putting all this behind me. But Icicle just HAD to show up and ruin everything!* A knot of frustration tightened in her

stomach and she released the pent up energy by kicking a nearby shrub.

Sora hadn't thought of it as a *hard* kick, but it has been strong enough to break the roots' weak grip on the rocks and the plant went flying off the ridge, plummeting straight down. Sora winced as the shrub bounced off several other ledges until finally coming to a halt on a wide shelf far below.

"Sorry," Sora murmured, feeling bad. It was unlike her to get this angry, but she knew it was only because she was angry with herself. She released another sigh. *It wasn't Icicle who ruined everything. It was me. I'm the one who killed Carnelian and Bigtail. This is* my *fault.*

Sora sniffled and wiped her nose with her talon. The sun was setting now and at this altitude a fiercely cold breeze whipped by, urging her back inside. She squeezed through a large crack in mountainside that was actually a secret entrance inside the palace. Jet had shown it to her when the two had gone off exploring. It was a bit of a tight fit for the muscular MudWing as she climbed upwards at a steep slope but finally she reached the enormous greenhouse that was adjoined to the passage.

It was by far Sora's favourite place in the old castle. Made of tall walls of glass, the greenhouse was the size of a ballroom. Whatever exotic plants had been house in here had died long ago but the local fauna had taken complete control of the room, crawling up the walls and burrowing their roots deep into the floor and stone. Sora breathed in the deep, earthy sent as she walked towards the center of the room following the tiled pathway that was cracked and coated with mossy fibers.

The domed glass above was slightly cracked, allowing the occasional rain to enter, but other than that the windows were surprisingly well intact...although they were incredibly fifthly from years of neglect. But Sora didn't mind, in fact she liked it. The way the sun filtered in through the dirt-clouded windows reminded her of swimming through the murky waters of the Mud Kingdom.

At the thought of the Mud Kingdom Sora's mood turned sour again. She buried her face in her talons and tried to imagine warm mud

flowing over her.

A part of her knew she was just being silly. She should just return to the Healing Center. There was no way they would have let Icicle hurt her, but this whole situation had made her second guess whether she *deserved* to be there or not. Thoughts as black as the night were crawling around in her skull, whispering words of doubt and shame in her ear.

There are dragons there that actually NEED healing. Who have suffered more than I have. She clenched her talons and opened them again. *All I am is a murderer. How could I ever think I would be anything else?*

The sound of shuffling rocks and muted voices snapped Sora to attention. The sounds were coming from the secret entrance tunnel. Hastily she dived into a nearby bush of wild roses, ignoring the painful thorns that dug under her scales.

Please don't be Icicle please don't be Icicle please don't be Icicle, she hysterically chanted in her head while cowering beneath her wings.

Her fear soon evaporated when she heard her brother's voice. "SORA!" he shouted, the panicked lilt in his voice echoing around the room before disappearing in the leaves. Sora shot up from her hiding spot.

"UMBER!" she shouted back in delight and crawled out of the bush. As soon as Umber saw her he sprinted over and Sora could swear that not even Marsh had ever run that fast. He collided into her with open wings, immediately encasing her and she leaned into his arms. He let out a choked sob.

"Don't ever ever EVER scare me like that again!" He broke the hug and held her shoulders firmly so they faced each other. There were tears in his eyes and Sora noticed her own vision was misty.

"Sora!" Jet bound over and nudged a perplexed Umber out of the way so she could give Sora a hug with her massive wings, squeezing tight. Jet's warmth made Sora's heart skip and she melted into the embrace.

"We were so worried about you!" Jet scolded through the hug.

Sora released a deep exhale. With Umber and Jet here she felt more relieved than she had the whole day and she let everything spill out. "I'm so sorry I worried you, but, I...I saw Icicle at the Healing Center. Umber, I swear it was her, she was there and I..."

"It's alright, Sora," he spoke calmly. "We saw her too."

"Yeah, and she got in SERIOUS trouble, ha!" Jet hooted. "She got her posh tail dragged back to the Ice Kingdom. She won't be bothering us anytime soon."

The tension is Sora's body evaporated. Icicle was gone. She was safe for a little bit longer.

Jet gave her a friendly pat on the back. "Now let's go back to the Healing Center. If we hurry we can make it back in time for dinner."

Sora's smile fell from her face. The toxic murmurs in her head grew louder. They thundered and crashed in her mind, bringing fourth everything she had been terrified to admit...but she couldn't hold it back anymore.

"I'm not going back," Sora decided.

Jet blinked in shock while Umber took on a concerned expression. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Sora steadied her breathing, imagining mud pouring over her in preparation for her confession. *I'd have to tell them at some point. No point running anymore.*

"I-I don't deserve to be there. There are other dragons who need to be there more than I do; dragons who are worthy to be given a second chance. And...I'm not one of those dragons." Sora cleared her throat to hide the tremble in her voice. "I'm sorry but I can't go back."

"WHAT?" Jet flared her wings. "Sora, don't be ridiculous. Of COURSE you deserve to be at the Healing Center! That's its whole purpose, to help dragons who need it."

"Sora, I know it's been a tough day but *please* don't do this," Umber's calmer voice advised. He grabbed her talons and started to pull her towards the exit. "Come one, why don't we go back to the Healing Center. You'll feel better after a good night's sleep."

Sora withdrew her talons from Umber's. She closed her eyes tightly and shook her head. "No, I won't go back. I've caused enough trouble already."

Jet and Umber exchanged grim looks. Umber went to speak but Sora silenced him by placing her tail tip against his mouth. "I'm sorry, Umber. But I just can't."

"Ahem." A fourth voice spoke up from the shadows and Sora squeaked, ducking behind Umber. She peeked over Umber's shoulder to see it was Flame. By the unsurprised expressions on the others' faces Sora guessed he had been there the whole time. Avoiding the happy reunion and keeping his distance.

But now he revealed himself. The last light of the setting sun hitting his scales as it struggled to crawl through the foliage and dirty windows. Sora observed the SkyWing carefully.

Back in Jade Academy she had been terrified of Flame. She had avoided him at all costs, but now it was different. Umber seemed to really like him, and she couldn't ignore how happy her brother always was after spending a day with the rough SkyWing.

"I couldn't help but overhear what you were saying," Flame spoke to Sora. She wilted slightly under his gaze but she heard no malice or mockery in his tone. In fact he seemed to be making an effort to sound kind, although it came off as sounding like a confused grumble. "And, well, I just wanted to say I understand."

Sora's eyes widened. That was the last thing she had expected him to say. "You...understand?"

The SkyWing nodded and began tearing at stalks of grass that were breaking thought the stone pathway. "I've done some shitty things recently, and I regret it. Dragons have gotten hurt because of what I did. Because...I couldn't control my anger." His eyes briefly flickered

to Umber and then back down. "But your brother told me some stuff today that really stuck with me. I mean, I can't change what I did but I can change myself. I can become someone who wouldn't make that mistake again...if that makes any sense."

Sora cocked her head to the side and she considered his words. *But* can *I change who I am? And even if I do, it still won't change what I've done.* She shook her head. "I don't know..."

Umber's gentle wingtip brushed against her arm. "I think what Flame is trying to say is that you aren't the same person you were back then. You're a different Sora than before. If you were put in the same situation, knowing everything you know now, would you do the same thing?"

Sora inhaled sharply. "Of course not!" *I could never never never do that again! I'm still not sure how I did it in the first place.* Every time Sora tried to think of her actions in those first few weeks of Jade Academy, it was like a heavy black cloud of acid had enveloped those memories. It burned her to try and dig them out.

Jet sidled up to Sora and threw a wing around her, forcing her out of her thoughts.

"You see," her SkyWing friend said. "You're NOT a murderer Sora. But you do still need help." Sora nodded solemnly. Softly and a slowly the dark whispers in her head were becoming silent. Jet continued, "But don't worry, because at the end of this struggle you'll come out as a new, stronger dragon!"

"And to be fair, I think the new Sora deserves a chance, don't you?" Flame asked. "Hell, if someone like ME can get a second chance I'm sure there would be no problem for you."

Umber quickly spoke up, "You deserve a second chance just as much as anyone else, Flame."

The two males locked eyes and the way they looked at each other made Sora lower her gaze to give them some privacy. Eventually Flame shrugged. "Maybe," he softly said.

"So will you come back with us?" Jet leaned in to meet Sora's eyes.

Sora hesitated and looked around at her friends. Warmth spread through her, forcing out all the guilt and fear she had been nursing in her heart. *If I can become someone better, then maybe it will be worth it.*

"OK. I'll go back."

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Umber could not describe how happy he was to be going back to the Healing Center with his sister. The moons were floating above the horizon as they made their way back. Their first stop was at Zephyr's office, where the anxious Healer was still there coordinating a search team for Sora.

When she saw Sora approaching she rushed over. "Sora! Thank the Moons you're alright! I am so relieved you are safe." The SkyWing looked ragged with worry and Sora ducked her head.

"I...I'm so so so sorry, I just, when I saw Icicle here I just panicked I didn't know what to do," Sora began to apologize profusely but Zephyr just wrapped her in a tight hug. There was nothing but relief in the Healer's eyes.

"It's alright, Sora. No one expected something like this to happen. If she hadn't snuck in she would have been stopped at the main entrance. This should have never happened and it's not your fault." Zephyr released Sora from the hug and took her talons in her own. "If it's alright with you, I would like to talk to you for a little bit before you go back to your room. I just want to make sure you're alright. Does that sound good to you?"

Sora nodding gently and Umber sighed. While he was reluctant to leave Sora he knew the two females would want their privacy. "So, I'll see you back in the room?" He directed the question to Sora. He must have sounded disappointed because she gave him an apologetic nod in response.

Quickly he corrected his tone to sound happier. He didn't want to
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make his sister feel guilty for talking with her Healer. "OK! Sounds good, I'll even get the tea started," he offered with a smile. It warmed his heart when Sora smiled back.

"Thanks, you're the best brother ever." She touched their noses together and Umber's spirits lifted.

"Yes, I think you and Flame should get as much rest as possible," Zephyr chimed in. "When we're done I'll escort Sora back myself. And Jet, sweetheart, you can go head home. I'll meet you there."

"Sure, mom," Jet said before approaching Sora and giving the MudWing one last hug. In their embrace Jet whispered something to Sora, who smiled in response. Umber strained his ears to hear but the SkyWing was already pulling away and saying her farewells. Soon afterwards Sora and Zephyr retreated into the Healer's office and Umber was left alone with Flame.

Or rather, a semi-unconscious Flame. The SkyWing was slouched against the wall, his face resting against the smooth surface and his eyes were closed. Carefully Umber approached his friend and tapped him with his wingtip. "Flame?"

The SkyWing's eyes immediately cracked open but not all the way. His eyelids still drooped deeply. Lazily he lifted his head off the wall and turned to Umber. "Is it time to go to bed yet?"

Umber chuckled. "Yeah, it is. Come on, I'll walk you back to your room. Just in case you fall asleep on your way there or something."

Flame grumbled some sort retort but heaved himself up to follow Umber, moaning and groaning as he did so.

Umber didn't hide his laugh. "You sound like a ninety year old dragon."

"Well I FEEL like one. Holy shit, I just want to go to SLEEP!" He rubbed his eyes with the back of his talon and yawned, exposing his sharp teeth. "I think it should be illegal to not sleep for a whole night."

Umber smiled and felt his face grow warm as he and Flame began

the trek back to the SkyWing's room. Every once in a while Umber would extend his wing to help the stumbling red dragon stay on his feet but their progress was still slow.

Every few seconds Umber's eyes would flicker to Flame only to shyly turn away a moment later. Umber wasn't one to lie to himself. He was well aware that he had developed feelings for the SkyWing next to him, and they had only grown stronger over the course of the day.

Even when Umber had learned about what Flame had done to Stonemover it hadn't changed his feelings. In fact they had only made them stronger. Flame had finally opened up to him and Umber finally realized where the SkyWing's guilt was coming from. *I know he regrets what he did, and I can tell it's hard for him. But I am so proud of him for being here and trying to get better.*

And of course, Umber still couldn't believe that Flame had been able to convince Sora to come back. If it hadn't been for Flame, Umber wasn't sure he would have been able to persuade her to return. His admiration for Flame had grown exponentially and every time he thought of the handsome SkyWing he couldn't stop the grin that spread over his face.

Finally they reached Flame's room. Weakly he slid open the door and turned to say goodbye. "I'll see you tomorrow then?" he asked and Umber swore he heard a hopeful lilt in his rough voice.

"Yeah, sure!" Umber smiled and stood closer to the red dragon. "But before you go, I just wanted to say thanks. I can't tell you how much I appreciate what you did today." Umber shuffled his talons.

Flame slowly blinked and furrowed his brow. "You mean what I said to Sora today? Half of that was shit I just made up on the spot, and the other half was stuff I've heard you say. So really, all the smart sounding stuff came from you."

Umber's face warmed at the compliment and he felt butterflies take flight in his stomach. "Or maybe you're smarter than you think," he offered.

Flame only shrugged but his face seemed to become redder. "Meh, I doubt it but whatever. See you tomorrow."

"Flame, wait..."

Maybe it was because he was severely sleep deprived and not in a sound mental state, or perhaps it would because his emotions were in complete turmoil from worrying so much about Sora all day. Whatever the reason, Umber couldn't stop himself. He placed a talon on Flame's shoulder to steady himself as he reached up and brushed his lips against the SkyWing's cheek, just below his wound, in a quick kiss. He pulled away an instant later to see Flame's wide-eyed expression, but Umber didn't wait for a response.

He bolted from the scene, sprinting back to his room as fast as he could all while grinning like an idiot.

Chapter 18

Flame couldn't stop thinking about the kiss. It had been as soft as butterfly wings but so brief he sometimes swore it never happened. Its impact, however, had been anything but gentle. As soon as Umber's mouth had connected with his scales it had felt like a bolt of lightning striking him in the face while someone sucker punched him in the stomach IN ADDTION to being wacked over the head with a frying pan, leaving him stunned and speechless...in a good way. He had just sat at the door with a vacant expression for ten minutes before crawling into bed. He thought about the kiss until he fell asleep, then he dreamed of it, and when he woke up the next morning it was still on his mind.

So does that mean I was right? Does Umber think of me as more than a friend? Or was it a "friend kiss"...are those even a real thing? He buried his face in his talons and groaned. *But do I like him back?*

"Flame?" Starfish's voice snapped him out of his thoughts. He had nearly forgotten he was currently in a session with his Healer.

"Did you hear a *thing* I said?" His Healer clasped his talons together with an expectant expression.

"Uh....nope."

Starfish sighed and placed his notebook down. "It seems you are rather distracted today, Flame. Is there something on your mind?"

Ugh, where do I begin?

Flame shifted around on his floor pillow awkwardly, trying to think of what to share with the SeaWing. After he reached semi-reclined position he decided it didn't fucking matter; the guy already knew everything about him to begin with. Besides, Starfish had a way of figuring out what was going on in Flame's head, an annoying trait

he shared with Umber.

He might as well tell him.

"Uh...well, it's just that..." Flame struggled to put his thoughts into words. *Have you ever had your best friend randomly kiss you before disappearing and now you feel like doing 100 back-flips in the air because you're so happy but also feel like jumping in bed and never coming out because you're so terrified?*

Defeated and deflated, Flame decided to try for a different approach.

"So, Starf," he said using the new nickname he had given his Healer. He had begun using it a few days ago in an attempt to annoy the SeaWing but unsurprisingly Starfish hadn't minded. Instead he actually seemed to enjoy it. "Have you ever had a crush on someone?"

The SeaWing blinked and some pattern briefly flashed over his luminescent scales. "Uh...that's a rather interesting question but I suppose the answer is: yes." Starfish rubbed his gills nervously. "Is there a reason you wanted to know this information?"

"Well, yeah," Flame answered while shuffling down more into the pillow. "How did you KNOW you had a crush on someone? What did it feel like?"

Starfish's eyes widened with understanding and a small smile formed along his mouth. "Ah, I see. Do you have a crush on someone, Flame?"

"NO!" Flame instinctively responded but then bit his tongue. He folded his arms across his chest. "Well...maybe but I DON'T KNOW! That's why I'm asking you!"

The Healer folded his talons together and rested his chin on the knuckles. "Perhaps instead of *me* telling you what it's like to have a crush, you can tell me what *you* think it involves."

Flame pursed his lips. *Leave it to Starf to turn my dumb questions into some sort of learning opportunity.* Flame shuffled around on the

pillow again to buy himself some time to think. He had never been involved in a romantic situation before, but he HAD read about them in his graphicolls. Usually there was always some sort of romantic sub-plot. Flame had always found them annoying but now he tried to recall them.

"I guess if you have a crush on someone you think about them a lot," the SkyWing suggested meekly. Starfish nodded in encouragement. "But, like, not in the same way you think about a friend."

"And what makes it different?"

Starfish let Flame think about it before answering. "Erm, well when you have a crush on someone you want to be close to them, right? You miss them a lot and when you see them you want to give them hugs and...*kisses*." Flame turned his face away from Starfish as he felt the blush rise in his cheeks. He was confident that Starf had noticed but luckily the SeaWing remained mute on the subject. Instead he followed up on Flame's answer.

"So is that how *you* feel when you think about this person?"

Flame groaned, his cluttered feelings leaking out of his body as lazy spirals of smoke from his snout. How *did* he feel about Umber? He had never really paid attention. Umber was his only *real* friend so it made sense that he would think about him a lot and want to spend time with him. But was it romantic?

Flame never recalled wanting to kiss Umber...but he certainly hadn't hated it when Umber had kissed *him*.

"Uugh, I don't know. It's all so confusing!" Flame buried his face in his talons.

Starfish met Flame's eyes in sympathy and stood up from where he was sitting on his own pillow and approached his patient. "Flame, I understand perfectly well that romantic feelings cannot be controlled or halted, but as your Healer I think it is my duty to advise you to hold back from getting into any serious romantic relationships for the time being."

Flame shot up from his pillow, bristling. "What's *that* supposed to mean? You don't think I'm good enough to be in a relationship?"

"Not at all." Starfish raised his talons in defense. "I am simply stating that you still have a lot of personal growth to go through. Right now I would rather you focus your time and efforts on yourself and your relationship with your mother before getting into anything romantic."

At the mention of his mother Flame's anger deflated and he slumped back down in the pillow. *I still haven't gotten any letters from her...she must just be busy still. Or maybe they got lost in the mail. Fucking useless mail service.*

Besides the nagging hurt of not hearing from his mother, Flame also felt a twinge of guilt. *Starf is right, though. If I want to date Umber I don't want to be this angry mess. He deserves better.*

Flame sighed. "OK, you're right."

"Excellent." Starfish beamed at him and returned to his seat. "And you can also use this time to figure out your feelings more. Spend some more time with whoever it is you think you like and see where things lead."

"Yeah, yeah, OK." Flame waved his talons in dismissal and Starfish took the hint that it was time to change the subject.

"So Flame, before you leave, I just wanted to discuss something with you." The Healer steepled his claws together and put them up to his chin. It was a habit Starfish did when he was about to discuss something he knew would make Flame annoyed or upset. *Oh fuck, now what?*

"It's about your punishment for running off in the middle of the night."

Flame snorted and rolled his eyes. "This is SO unfair! Ibis was just being a bitch! Why do *I* have to be punished for it?"

Starfish shrugged his wings helplessly. "I didn't want to punish you either but Zephyr made a deal with me. If I give you a punishment

then Ibis would not have to return to guard you for the remainder of the week as was originally planned."

"Pfft, like I care what that bitch does," Flame hissed but secretly felt relieved. If he never saw that foul faced sand-snorter again in his life then that was just FINE by him.

"Anyway," Starfish continued. "I have thought of a few different 'punishments' for you, so how about I list them off and you tell me which one you would prefer."

Flame's forehead creased in confusion. "I get to choose which one I like the most? Isn't the *point* of a punishment supposed to be that it sucks?"

Starfish winked. "Not necessarily. They told me to give you a chore or something, so that is what I did." He pulled out a parchment with a small bullet-point list written on it. "So here are you're options..."

Flame groaned loudly as Starfish read them off.

"You could help in the art center..."

"No."

"Well then maybe you could help clean up the spa..."

"Nope."

"Help organize the library?"

"Nah."

"OK, what if you help out Jet at the front desk?"

"Oh, *hell* no!"

Starfish pursed his lip and pinched the skin at the bridge of his snout. "Well I only have one more option on my list and that is helping out around the gardens."

Flame look up from his frown, his eyebrow raised in interest. He *did*

like the gardens.

"What would I have to do?" the SkyWing asked and Starfish perked, happy to see Flame finally showing interest.

"Oh, just basic stuff really. Watering, weeding the beds, and help planting new flowers."

Flame squinted. It didn't seem like *that* hard of a job to do. He scratched his chin and shrugged. "Sure, why not. I'll go with the gardening one."

His Healer grinned and wrote a check mark beside one of the lines on the parchment. "Wonderful! I'll let Tyto know you'll be joining the landscape crew. They usually meet twice a day, once before breakfast and once more after dinner but since you don't actually work here you can just go once a day."

There was no way in hell Flame was going ANYWHERE before breakfast so he decided on the evening option. Starfish nodded and wrote Flame's decision down.

"Then that's settled," Starfish explained and stood up once again to place the parchment on his desk. "They meet outside of the cafeteria and I'll let Tyto know later today to expect you there." Starfish looked up just as Flame made a grimace. The SeaWing sighed wistfully. "It'll only be for a week, Flame. I know it's not fair but please just promise me you'll give it a try."

Once again Starfish had read Flame's mind. It *wasn't* fair that he had to put up with all this bullshit! But when Flame's angry eyes met Starf's pleading ones the SkyWing realized how bratty he was acting. Flame exhaled his frustration and looked down. He had no one to blame but himself for his situation.

He leaned back in his seat. "Yeah, OK" he promised.

Starfish brushed his wing against Flame's. "Thank you," he said in earnest.

Flame tugged at his ear, a little embarrassed by the sincerity. "OK sure."

It wasn't that Flame was upset by Starf's kindness. He just felt awkward in these situations since he had no idea how to react.

Realizing that Flame was uncomfortable Starf gave an apologetic smile and pulled away. "Anyway, you are free to go and I will see you tomorrow," the Healer said as he slid open the door to allow Flame to leave. The SkyWing got up from his seat, stretching out his wings and back with the flexibility of a feline.

"Ugh, FINALLY!" he exclaimed. Even though the floor pillows were comfy it still got annoying sitting in them for an hour. "Thanks again, Starf." Flame nodded to the SeaWing as he passed by. Starfish grinned and stuck his head out the door to shout a last minute reminder to Flame.

"Don't forget, your gardening chores start tonight so don't be late!"

"Yeah, yeah," Flame absently replied and waved his wings to indicate that he had heard.

"And Flame?" Starfish shouted and Flame paused to look back. "The person you have a crush on is Umber, isn't it?"

Flame nearly choked on his own spit as his face grew as hot as the sun. "I...UM...WELL I HAVE TO GO NOW!"

Flame fled from the scene with a face as red as a tomato. He made it to the gardens and leaned against a tree to calm his breathing. Once settled, Flame hissed at some nosy onlookers and began to walk around the gardens to clear his mind.

Being reminded of the MudWing had brought all the confusing thoughts and feelings rushing back, bombarding his head and heart. He thought again of the kiss and of Umber's warm amber-tinted eyes that made his stomach do flips and his heart flutter.

Crap. What the hell is WRONG with me? Is this what it's like to have a crush? Is that what I am feeling now? AAARG WHY ARE EMOTIONS SO HARD!?

Flame slowed his walk as he passed by his favourite reading spot. The lilacs were still in bloom and letting off a sweet fragrance. He

let a smile slip through as he remembered taking Umber here for his reading lesson. The smile quickly dripped off to be replaced with a frown.

If Flame was being honest with himself, he knew very well what a crush was. He also knew that playing stupid wouldn't change how he felt about Umber. Flame pressed his forehead against a nearby tree and groaned.

Who am I kidding? Of COURSE I have a fucking crush on Umber. The realization made Flame both terrified and relieved. His relief came from the fact that he could finally stop lying to himself. All those years of keeping his guard up and not trusting anyone had kept him from admitting the obvious, but now it was out in the open and Flame had never felt more vulnerable.

And it was that vulnerability that made him terrified.

Until Umber had shown up Flame had never realized how much he had craved to have a friend. Someone that cared for him and his interests, that was honest, trustworthy and there for him no matter what.

But now that Flame had had a taste of that, the thought of being without it was unbearable. The thought of being without *Umber* was unbearable.

A couple of dragons walked past and Flame quickly lifted his head from the tree, rubbing off some of the flaky moss that had stuck to his forehead. He gave the dragons an indignant hiss and continued on through the gardens.

He followed a winding path that led him to the edge of the garden where a fat, slow moving river meandered by. The cold water that dripped down from the mountain fed this river as it circled around the SkyWing's capital city before flowing towards the Diamond Spray River. But what made this part of the garden special were the couple of willow trees that lined the bay and stretched over the water, letting their lanky branches dip below the surface. The leaves rustled gently as the soft current pulled on the branches, but other than that and the soft bubbling of the river the place was

silent.

Flame took a deep breath and laid down on the soft grass under the shade of the tree.

It was at this point that Flame was reminded of what Starfish had told him during their session: *You still have a lot of personal growth to do. Right now I would rather you focus your time and efforts on yourself.*

His Healer's words ran through his head once again. Flame buried his face in his talons and groaned. *I know Starf is right, but NOW what am I supposed to do? So I finally accept that I have feelings for Umber but now I can't even act on them!?*

Flame stood up and began to pace. While the idea of revealing his feelings to Umber was terrifying, and even more troubling thought came to mind.

But what if I don't *tell him? What if Umber doesn't want to wait for me to figure things out? What if he loses interest?*

Flame's tail swished back and forth, sending loose dirt and pebbles into the river. He sat down at the river bank and began to pull on the reeds that emerged from the mud. *I can't let that happen* he promised. *I won't lose Umber.*

But at the same time he knew Umber deserved better than what Flame could give him.

Flame blew out a smoky cloud in frustration. "UUHG! Why is this so HARD?" he shouted to the air. He grabbed a nearby stone and threw it into the river. It made a measly 'plop' sound before sinking to the bottom.

That wasn't helpful at all. Maybe I should just go get something to eat. Just as he turned to leave he heard the sound of approaching voices. His ears perked forward as he recognized who was speaking.

The long branches of the willow provided enough cover to hide him, but he carefully approached the leafy curtain. He pulled it back ever so slightly just as Sora and Jet walked by.

And following slowly behind them was Umber.

Flame's breath hitched in his throat and he quickly let the branches fall back into place to hide him further. He watched as Umber trailed behind the dragonesses. He wore a pained and worried expression that made Flame want to run over and wrap his wings around him.

Sora seemed to take notice as well and stopped in her tracks to turn and look at her brother.

"Oh Umber, I wish you would just tell me what's making you so sad. You were so giddy this morning but now you're so..."

"Mopey," Jet finished and Sora gave her a harsh look.

Flame watched intently as Umber shuffled his talons. "It's just...I haven't seen Flame all day. I'm worried he's avoiding me."

Sora and Jet looked at each other in confusion. "Why would he be avoiding you?" Jet asked.

Umber's wings drooped. "I might have done something last night to make him angry."

"Like what?" Sora asked and suddenly Umber became flustered.

"Uh...nothing. Never mind. Let's just keep going...maybe I'll see him at lunch or something." Umber gave his sister a reassuring smile but Flame could tell it was forced. As the trio of dragons continued on their path Flame let out a weary sigh.

Now he REALLY wanted to go and wrap his wings around Umber. *He thinks I'm mad at him for kissing me.* Flame unconsciously began to gauge the soil with his talons. *What should I do? Should I run after him and tell him? But what if he wants to get into a relationship right away? AAAH THIS IS ALL HAPPENING SO FAST!*

Flame took a couple of deep breaths. He was a confused and conflicted mess right now. He needed time to think. He hated the fact that Umber was feeling upset because of him, but right now he had to sort his thoughts out.

Carefully he snuck out from the curtain of leaves and branches. He hurried through the garden in the opposite direction that his trio of friends had been going in, feeling guilty as he fled. *Sorry, Umber. I just need some time alone.*

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I ruined everything! Flame hates me now, I just know it! ARRG, WHY DID I HAVE TO KISS HIM? WHY AM I SO STUPID?

Umber gently thwacked his head against the table as he sat in the library with Sora and Jet. Even though Umber preferred the gardens, the library did have its own charm. It was located in the center of the north-most building and it also functioned as a residence.

Scroll-shelves had been built into the walls of the building; they swerved and bent with the curvature of the circular room only to diverge like a river around a stone should a window or door get in their way. It gave the illusion that the whole building had walls made of swirling mud, or at least Umber liked to think so.

Each of the floors also had plenty of lamps, couches, cushions and tables to sit back and relax.

But what Umber liked most about *this* library was that it didn't smell old and dusty. The open ceiling and giant archways allowed the fresh breeze from the garden to waft through. Umber could smell the rich, earthy fauna that lay just beyond the walls.

It reminded him of Flame.

With another groan he thumped his head against the table again. This time Sora took notice and jolted at his head shook the table on impact. Cautiously she put down her scroll and approached her brother.

"Oh, Umber. Are you still worried that Flame is angry at you?"

Umber let out a groan of affirmation. Sora patted his back tenderly. "I wish you would tell me why you're so worried. What did you even *do* to him that would make him mad?"
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"Did you punch him in the face?" Jet asked. "Please tell me you punched him in the face."

"No no no it's wasn't anything like that," Umber insisted and lifted his head. He saw the two females watching him expectantly, dying to know more. Under their intense gazes Umber relented. *I guess they'll have to find out eventually.*

He sighed and began. "Well...last night Flame was pretty drowsy so I walked back to his room with him..."

"Yeees..." Jet leaned in.

"So we chatted for a little while outside of his door, and...I don't know maybe I was just tired but at the same time I was so grateful to have his help and to have him there for me..."

"Go on..." Sora encouraged.

Umber took a deep breath, his heart pounding at the memory of the event. "So...I KISSED HIM AND RAN OFF!" Umber buried his face in his talons.

There was a horrible, silent pause as Umber waited for their response. This silence was ended as Jet slammed her fists down on the table.

"Oh my CLAWS, ARE YOU SERIOUS!?" she hollered with orange eyes sparkling wildly. A few nearby dragons gave her harsh looks at all the noise she was making but she ignored their stares and jumped over the table, grabbing Umber by the shoulders.

"You HAVE to tell me everything! All the details! Don't leave anything out!"

"JET!" Sora interrupted, prying her friend's talons off of Umber. "He doesn't have to talk about it if he doesn't want to." She gave the SkyWing a stern glare. Jet sighed, taking a few deep breaths to calm herself.

"OK. Yes. You're right. But isn't this exciting? I *told* you they would make a cute couple." She nudged Sora and winked.

This made Umber's blush deepen. Was it *that* obvious that there was something between him and Flame?

Sora came over to him and rested her head against his. "I get it now. You're worried he doesn't feel the same way, right?"

Umber shuffled his wings, adjusting himself to rest against his sister. "Honestly, I'm pretty sure he does like me back. I wouldn't have kissed him if I didn't think it was mutual...it's just that...I'm afraid I took it too far too soon." His shoulders sagged. "I'm worried I scared him off. Flame's really important to me; I don't want to lose him."

Jet approached him and threw a large wing around his shoulders. "Don't be so hard on yourself. I'm sure Flame is just busy this morning and isn't trying to avoid you."

"I hope so," Umber wished. *I really hope I didn't mess everything up.*

Jet and Sora seemed to pick up on his anxious mood and Umber could tell there was some sort of silent communication going on between them. It ended when Jet cleared her throat loudly.

"You know, if you're really worried about the whole Flame thing, then maybe you should you should get him a gift," the SkyWing suggested.

Umber furrowed his brow, not really following her logic. "You mean...like a gift to say I'm sorry?"

The pink scaled dragon shook her head. "No! As in a ROMANTIC gift to win him over."

Umber sat up straight, blushing deeply and wiggling out of her grasp. "Haha, uh, look, I really appreciate you trying to help but I think I should just leave Flame alone for a while."

"It's not that bad of an idea, Umber," Sora chimed in. "What if you made him something really thoughtful. Something that could help you convey your feelings in a clear way?"

Umber took a moment to consider it. *Maybe I* should *do that. Give*

something to Flame that isn't just me flailing around and making a mess of things. He still wasn't entirely convinced he would do it, but his interest was piqued. "But what could I make? I can't write him anything...maybe a picture?"

Suddenly an idea popped into his head. "OH! I know what I can do...but I will need you two to help me."

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Author's Note:

Happy Halloween, friends! Maybe I should have saved that "spooky" haunted castle chapter for today so that I could be in sync with the season ;3 Anyway, I hope you are all enjoying the story, even if it isn't spooky (although Flame is kind of freaking out right now >:3).
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Chapter 19

Flame spent most of the day moping around, hiding in his room. He didn't want to risk running into Umber so he hid himself away.

He was hoping some alone time would help him figure out his thoughts, but the day was almost spent and he was just as confused as before. This was probably because he had wasted a lot of time reading graphicolls and napping; anything to avoid thinking about his feelings.

It was late afternoon now and the sun was low in the sky, not yet touching the horizon but threatening to. By the angle that the sunlight filtered in through his window Flame estimated that it was around dinner time. This meant he would have to go to that stupid gardening thing soon.

He groaned and flopped on his bed, burying his face into the pillow. *I could just skip it; maybe no one will notice if I didn't go...*

But Flame knew that wasn't true. Starf would be asking about it tomorrow, not to mention that Tyto guy would be expecting him.

"UUUGH!" Flame grumbled loudly into his pillow but reluctantly he got up and made his way towards the door. *Let's just get this shit over with.*

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With most of the residents at dinner the garden was fairly empty. Only a few lonely souls wandered the grounds but none of them took notice of Flame.

Starfish's instructions came to mind as Flame navigated through the buildings to reach the main entrance outside of the cafeteria, where the gardeners would be meeting. As Flame passed by the cafeteria he wondered if Umber was in there. *Is he still upset? Does he miss*
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me? Is he mad at me for avoiding him?

Flame felt the guilt sit in his throat like a lump that refused to be swallowed. *I'll talk to Umber later,* he promised. *But just not right now.*

He hurried on towards the other side of the Center Building to the meeting place but stopped when he saw a mob of twenty or so dragons gathered several meters away from the entrance. Flame gawked at the sight in utter confusion.

Was there some sort of event going on that he didn't know about? Was there a last minute cancellation or change in the meeting place?

Flame carefully approached the crowd and saw that this *was* the gardening crew. It mostly consisted of SkyWings with the occasional Mud or SandWing. He could tell they were the gardeners because each dragon had a harness strapped around their chest that had shears, little shovels, and other various horticultural tools.

He also noticed that there were a dozen wagons pushed up against the side of the building. Some were filled with dirt and mulch, others with wicker baskets and a few were filled with large jugs of water that had little nozzles at the ends for watering.

Flame lingered at the edge of the crowd for a while to watch what they did. They seemed to be dividing themselves into group and Flame guessed that someone from within the throng of dragons was coordinating all of this.

No point just sitting here. I guess I'll have to go in.

Forcing his way into the wall of scaled bodies Flame finally reached the center of the fray and saw a small SkyWing male giving out orders. He had a slight frame and his scales were the same shade of red as a rose. When he spoke his voice was soft but Flame could tell he was in charge of this whole operation.

Flame approached him and cleared his throat loudly to get his attention. It didn't work. The dragon was busy looking at a piece of

parchment and checking off items on a list.

Flame tried again. "Ah*em.* Are you Tyto?"

"Yes, yes. That's me," he acknowledged without looking up.

"OK...well I'm Flame. Starfish said he would speak to you..."

"OH!" He finally lifted his head and gave Flame a soft smile. "Yes, Starfish did come speak to me today. So you're our new volunteer, eh?"

Flame shrugged. He wouldn't consider what he was going as 'volunteering' but he wasn't going to tell this guy why he was really here. *I guess Starf didn't bother to mention that this is a punishment for me.*

"So...do you have something for me to do or what?" Flame asked. Tyto nodded and scanned his list once again.

Please don't make me do something shitty like weeding, Flame silently prayed.

Tyto saw something on the parchment and perked. "Ah, here we are. I put you on weeding duty for tonight! I hope that's alright."

Well fuck, Flame thought but didn't bother asking for anything else. He merely grumbled acknowledgement as Tyto reached into a nearby bag and pulled out a pair of gloves made from worn leather.

He passed them to Flame. "You'll need some gardening gloves, and you can get a basket to put the weeds in from that wagon over there."

"Thanks," Flame spoke unenthusiastically and went to get his things.

"Wait! Don't forget your map! I've circle the flower beds that you and your partner will be handling tonight."

Flame took the small hand-doodled map and frowned. "I have a partner?"

Tyto nodded. "Yes, yes. His name is Bergschrund and he is a volunteer like you."

Flame let out a bark of laughter. "What kind of stupid-ass name is *Bergschrund*?"

"It's an IceWing name," Tyto answered as if that was explanation enough. "But don't worry, he's a sweetheart. He should be just finishing up his Healing session now, so he'll be around in a little while."

"Yeah, whatever," Flame mumbled and went to get his supplies. When he reached the wagon he carelessly threw the baskets around until he found one he liked and went on his way, leaving someone else to deal with the disorganized mess he made.

He held the basket with his wing and followed the map towards his designated flower bed. He found it eventually near the center of the garden and had to pause for a moment to take it all in. The bed itself was arranged in a large spiral so that dragons would walk around and admire the vast variety of flowers and trees that were planted neatly in the winding arms.

For a moment Flame forgot why he was there and excitedly began inspecting the flora. He had no idea what any of their names were so he decided to make up his own. Flame looked at a thick cluster of tiny star shaped blossoms that condensed low to the ground. He went with the name 'firecracker' for the way they sizzled and popped a vibrant red and orange. Beside the firecrackers were larger flowers that were the colour of dusk and had fat, velvety petals. Flame couldn't stop touching them...at least until he accidentally ripped one off.

He discretely hid the evidence of his destruction in the dirt and named the flower 'softskies' for how it reminded him of flying on a cloudless evening. Also because it was so soft and easily broken, really, he had BARELY touched it and it just fell apart!

The next flower in line made him grimace, but not because it was ugly. In fact, Flame liked how the petals curved into the shape of a bell but frilled at the top like a wrinkly silk scarf. Unfortunately

their faded golden colour reminded him too much of Ibis. He tried to ignore this feature but couldn't. In the end he named them 'bitch-flower' after the SandWing.

Behind the bitch-flowers were some smaller plants that were practically being overwhelmed by their neighbours. Flame stepped into the bed to get a closer look and heard someone inhale sharply behind him.

"What are you DOING? You're destroying the begonias!"

Flame stiffened. *I recognize that voice!*

Swiftly he turned around and jumped into a fighting stance. "Come back for a rematch you piece of shit? I'll stomp you're face into the ground so hard you'll have grass stains for a week!" he threatened the approaching IceWing. It was the same one he had battled with less than a week ago. Flame's stomach twisted as he recalled that day; it certainly hadn't been his proudest moment. Especially when he remembered how he had been a total dick to Umber.

A flash of recognition passed across the IceWing's pale blue eyes and he snarled furiously, "WHY YOU LITTLE..." Abruptly the sentence cut off as the IceWing, through gritted teeth, closed his eyes and took several deep breaths as if preparing for meditation. Flame was a little uneasy about the sudden switch in temperament and took a few cautionary steps back.

Finally the IceWing opened his eyes and calmly spoke, "When Tyto said I had a new partner today I had no idea it was going to be *you*." There was a hint of malice in his voice, but mostly confusion.

Flame looked him over for any remaining signs of aggression but it had seemed to evaporate. From snout-to-tail the IceWing appeared docile. Finally what the IceWing had said reached him. "Wait...YOU'RE BERGSCHRUND?"

Bergschrund looked surprised that Flame knew his name, but nodded. "Yes. But you may call me Berg if you like."

Oh there are several things I'd LIKE to call you but they would just get

me into more trouble.

An awkward silence followed where the two dragons simply stared at each other. Finally Berg cleared his throat and looked at his talons. "Listen, I'd like to apologize for my behaviour the other day...I realize I said and did some rather nasty things and, well, I'm sorry."

Flame pursed his lips and observed Berg with narrowed eyes. *One day this asshole is angrier than a knocked-down hornet's nest and now he's some sort of Zen master? I'm not buying it.*

"Is that so?" Flame challenged. "Because you seemed pretty ready to rip me apart a few second ago."

Berg coiled his tail, looking embarrassed. "Yes, that is something I am learning to...overcome while I am here." He paused and looked up at Flame. "I wasn't always like this, you know. I used to hardly ever get angry...but I guess the war affected me more than I wanted to admit. I started becoming so *angry* and the littlest of provocations..." His voice trailed off as he quickly realized he might be saying too much.

The angry itch crawling through Flame's scales suddenly stopped. He gazed a Berg with newfound comradery. *That sounds just like me...except for the fighting in the war part.*

"Anyway, I just wanted to say I am sorry," Berg concluded as if he had just closed a business deal and wanted to be done with the whole matter.

Flame finally got out of his defensive stance. "Erm...it's fine. I'm sorry too." Flame shuffled his wings as his thoughts went back to that day. "I was in a pretty shitty mood then as well, so, no hard feelings."

Berg gave a curt not of thanks and grabbed the basket he had brought along.

"Well, let's get started then," he said. He began picking small weeds out of the beds while Flame eyed him warily.

Flame wasn't much for starting conversations but he couldn't stop his curiosity from being piqued.

"So why is an *IceWing* volunteering in the garden? Do you even *have* gardens where you come from?"

Berg paused in his work before answering. "No, we don't have any gardens in the Ice Kingdom. But I want to learn about them. I never knew there could be so many colours in the world until I came to the gardens...and my Healer recommended it to me." Quietly he went back to work, swiftly pulling out the little clovers and grass strands from the bed and depositing them into the basket.

Flame accepted the answer as reasonable. *I guess it's like how Starf said I should do cooking.* He released a sigh. He hadn't been able to do any cooking recently with all the drama that had been going on. He missed it.

Realizing he was just standing around being useless, Flame picked up his basket moved across from the IceWing to the other side of the bed and began messily picking out the weeds as well. Unlike Berg, every time Flame went to grab an unwanted plant he took a clump full of dirt with him as well. After five minutes of work his basket had more dirt in it than it had weeds.

Flame's eyes flickered to Berg who was looking tranquil and calm. The complete opposite of the dragon Flame had first met. *Has he really improved this much just by taking up a new hobby?*

"So gardening has cured your anger issues?" the SkyWing asked.

Berg released a sad scoff. "I wish. But no. My Healer has also been teaching me meditation tricks and breathing exercises to go through when I feel the, well, when I start feeling angry."

Flame furrowed his brow and threw another weed into the basket. "Meditation and breathing exercises? That sounds like some dumb RainWing thing."

For the first time since Flame had met him, Berg released a laugh. "That's because it *is* a dumb RainWing thing, or at least that's what I

thought at first. My Healer is a RainWing you see."

Flame snapped his head up. "What? But I haven't seen any RainWings around here!" *As if a RainWing would need to come to a place like this. Really, the most traumatic thing that could happen in the Rain forest is that you lose an hour of sleep or your favourite napping spot was taken.*

"That's because my Healer is the only one here," the IceWing explained with a hint of superiority, as if having the only RainWing as a Healer was some prestigious award.

As if some sloth-with-wings could be a better Healer than Starf, Flame skeptically thought. He wasn't a fan of this new, pompous attitude his partner had suddenly taken on and decided to take him down a notch.

"What else does she teach you? Advanced napping techniques? Does she give lessons on fruit identification? OH, what about sloth maintenance?" Flame taunted with a wolfish grin, trying to get a reaction from Berg.

The IceWing's ears twitched while a swarm of flurries blew from his nostrils, but he made no motion to argue back. Instead he spoke with forced calm, "As a matter of fact, she *does* give me sleeping advice. I've had horrible insomnia for years you see. And I'll have you know she is a WONDERFUL Healer and just because YOU can't understand the knowledge that other tribes can offer us doesn't mean you shouldn't respect them!"

The cool control of Berg's voice was lost as he continued to speak, and Flame couldn't hide his pert expression.

"Calm down, Berg. Maybe you should do some of those breathing things. You seem a little *tense*," Flame spoke with mock concern. Berg was losing composure and by the glare he was sending Flame it was obvious that the IceWing REALLY wanted to punch him in the face.

Suddenly Berg slammed his eyes shut and took several deep breathes. When he opened them again his shoulders relaxed and he

gazed amiably at the SkyWing, much to Flame's chagrin.

"My Healer has also been teaching me to communicate my emotions better, so let's try that," Berg began before addressing Flame. "I see you are trying to make me angry, and even though I don't know why, I am going to forgive you and move on," Berg spoke as if he had rehearsed that line a few times already.

Flame snorted. *That wasn't as fun as I thought it would be.* Although, Flame wasn't sure if his disappointment stemmed from Berg's muted reaction or if he just no longer enjoyed tormenting others as much as he used to.

The silence returned as the two dragons continued their chore. Berg's side of the garden looked splendid whereas Flame's bared more resemblance to a natural disaster. As they continued their monotonous work Flame's mind wandered back to Umber.

What am I going to tell him? The day is almost over and I still have no idea what I'm going to say! Maybe something like "Hey Umber, I have a crush on you too but SORRY we can't date because I'm an asshole that needs to learn how to NOT be an asshole. Buy hey, maybe in a few years we can get together!"

Flame shook his head. *Umber isn't going to want to wait that long! And honestly...I don't either.* The SkyWing groaned and rubbed his face, then groaned again as he realized he had just smeared dirt all over himself. *Fan – fucking - tastic.*

Flame went to reach for another weed but paused. His ears flicked up at the sound of a familiar voice approaching. He recognized it instantly. It was Umber and Sora.

CRAAAAAP!

The voices were coming from behind a row of tall pushes that shielded him from their view, but it would be any moment before they rounded the corner and saw him.

Flame did the first thing that came to mind. With a mighty leap he lunged towards Berg and dived underneath the white dragon's

wings.

"WHAT THE --" Berg flared his wings but Flame grab a hold of it and tugged it down over him like a blanket.

"Shut up and act natural!" he hissed at Berg.

"Nothing about this is *natural*! What are you doing? Get away from me--"

"I said shut up! And holy CRAP you're cold!" Flame shivered while he struggled to keep Berg from pushing him away.

"Well *obviously,* I'm an IceWing you idiot."

"SSSHHHHHHHH," Flame hushed one last time just as Umber and Sora came into view. Carefully he peaked past Berg's chest, icy wing over his head, and watched them pass by. Luckily they were not looking in his direction and instead were heading towards the herb garden.

Berg had stopped struggling as well. The IceWing was too busy curiously gazing back and forth between Flame and the MudWings he was hiding from.

As they walked by Flame heard snippets of the sib's conversation.

"We'll check his favourite reading spot. Maybe he'll be there!" Sora offered optimistically.

"I hope so," Umber followed with less vigour. Hearing Umber's voice made Flame's heart skip a beat. Sora turned around and gave Umber a friendly shove.

"Cheer up! Aren't you excited to give Flame his gift?"

Flame balked. *He has something to give me?*

For several heartbeats Umber didn't answer. When he did he sounded forlorn, "I just hope he likes it."

Their conversation died out as they continued down the path

towards the herb garden. Flame watched Umber's sagging shoulders disappear and winced when he felt the sharp bite of guilt latch onto him. Numbly he stood up, shaking off Berg's wing.

Meanwhile Berg wore a look of immense confusion. "What was *that* all about?" The IceWing looked in the direction that Umber had disappeared, and then looked back to Flame. "Is that someone else you've made an enemy of?"

Flame didn't bother to snap at the comment; his mood had been bogged down by the sudden guilt. Instead he just shook his head. "No, it's nothing like that. It's just...well...he...we...it's complicated."

Berg tugged his mouth to the side to give Flame a lopsided scowl. "So if you're not enemies then what's the problem?"

Flame hesitated in answering. On one talon it was none of Berg's business what was going on with him and Umber! Flame thought it would be perfectly reasonable to tell the IceWing to go shove his nosy snout somewhere else.

But on the other talon, Flame had been sulking around all day trying to figure everything out by himself and it had gotten him nowhere. Maybe talking it out with someone would help...and at this point he was desperate.

Flame let out a reluctant sigh before fixing Berg with an intense stare. "OK, look, just because I'm about to tell you about my problems DOESN'T mean we're buddy-buddy pals now. I just need someone to...help me logic everything out I guess."

Berg balked in surprise before putting on a thoughtful expression, "Well, IceWings are the most logical of the tribes so it seems you came to the right place. Go ahead." Berg waved his talon to signal for Flame to start. The SkyWing ignored the pretentious flare and prepared to spill his guts to this enemy-turned-acquaintance.

"OK, so that make MudWing you saw," Flame tilted his head in the direction Umber had went, "is sorta my crush who kinda-sorta likes me back, er, well DEFINITELY likes me back." Flames face went red as the kiss Umber gave him tingled across his cheek.

Berg furrowed his brow while his pale eyes looked Flame over. "Really? He likes you back? As in *romantic* feelings? Are you sure he doesn't just want to punch you in the face like most dragons?"

Flame snapped his gaze on Berg. "Fuck you! I am TOTALLY boyfriend material!" The SkyWing dropped his snarl when he saw Berg's amused grin. The IceWing was just trying to rile him up the same way Flame had tried to do to him. *Huh, OK I guess I deserved that one,* Flame admitted and continued his story.

"ANYWAY, so some *events* have happened recently and now we both are in this awkward place where we KNOW the other feels the same but don't know what to do. And to MAKE MATTERS WORSE my Healer told me to not get into anything serious because I should be focusing on my own problems." Flame's rant waned and the accusation fell from his voice. He tugged at the well-trimmed grass surrounding the flower bed. "But he's right. There a lot of stuff I want to fix about myself before Umber and I... well...anyway you get the point," he hastily summarized.

Berg nodded, blinking slowly while considering his words. "There's nothing wrong with taking time to figure things out you know."

Flame made a pile out of the grass blades he had pulled out of the ground. "Yeah yeah, I know...but what if Umber doesn't want to wait for me?" He knocked the pile over with a swish of his tail, distributing it over the lawn. "And I'm not all that happy about waiting either."

Berg's serrated talons tapped the ground as he thought. "Hmm...so your Healer *specifically* told you not to date him?"

The question made Flame pause. "Uh, he just said I shouldn't get into anything serious."

"So he made no comment about *dating* specifically?"

Flame narrowed his eyes. "What are you getting at?"

The IceWing picked up his bucket full of weeds. He tapped it on the ground a few times to compact the plants within. "I'm just saying

that dating doesn't have to be something serious. In fact, I've always considered it to be a fun, light-hearted way to get to know someone."

The look in Berg's eyes seemed to suggest he was hinting at something, but for the life of him Flame couldn't figure out what. Berg sighed and continued. "Dating someone doesn't mean you HAVE to be in a serious relationship. You can make it as casual or serious as you want it to be."

"Oooooooh." Realization dawned on him.

He's right. Just because I go on a few dates with Umber doesn't necessarily mean we're in a serious relationship. I know there are still a lot of changes I want to make about myself, but that doesn't mean I have to avoid Umber...a few dates wouldn't hurt.

Flame gave the IceWing a lopsided smile, impressed. "Huh, you're not too shabby with this advice stuff," he complimented.

Berg dipped his head in a shallow bow. "Anytime."

Flame looked Berg over, reconsidering everything he has assumed about the guy. *It was pretty nice of him to take my problem seriously and give me some good advice.*

The SkyWing gave Berg a friendly swat on the arm. "You know, you're not as stuck up and terrible as I thought." It had been meant as a compliment. "And sorry about trying to make you mad earlier."

Berg tenderly rubbed the part of his arm where Flame had hit. "It's fine. And I suppose you're not *as* crazy as I thought you were."

This earned an amused snort from Flame. The two males nodded at each other, and through silent means they agreed to some sort of truce.

By now the sun was sinking below the horizon. Dark blues and violets conquered the majority of the sky, pushing down the sun's last fiery rays. A SkyWing grounds keepers walked by lighting the lamps along the pathway. He would crawl up the pole towards the glass-encased torch at the top, open the little hatch and blow of

plumb of fire within.

Berg gave Flame an anxious look. "Perhaps we should get a move on with this weeding. If it's all the same to you, I would rather not spend the whole night here."

"Agreed." Flame nodded.

Quickly, and not-so-efficiently in Flame's case, the two dragons got back to work.

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It had only taken them half an hour to finish the task. They quickly put their tools away and bid each other a semi-friendly farewell. Flame left the garden feeling amused. *Less than a week ago I was talon-to-talon with him, but now we're gardening together. At this rate I wouldn't be surprised if I ended up joining a knitting club with Ibis.*

As he walked back to his room he passed by the herb garden. Umber wasn't there. Of course he wouldn't be there. Did he really expect Umber to wait for him in the dark?

Flame shook his head and continued onward. Even though Berg had helped him clear up some things it had created a whole new set of problems.

OK, so, I guess I could ask Umber on a date...that should be easy, right? I'll just walk up to him and ask. Yeah. Easy. Flame gulped. *What if he says no?* Flame knew he was being irrational. Umber was the one who had made the first move so why would he say no? Suddenly Flame stopped in his tracks as he realized something. *Shit! I have no idea what to do for a date? Crap, what does Umber like?*

Flame frantically tried to think of something as he continued to his room but his thoughts were cut off as he approached his door. Someone was waiting for him outside the door.

It was Umber. Of course it would be Umber. He had an anxious look about him as he stood with his talons hovering before the door. Every time the MudWing went to knock he would stop himself at the last minute and pull his talons back nervously.
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Flame took a shuddering breath as his heart kicked into overdrive, pounding so furiously Flame was worried the whole kingdom would hear it. He was quickly learning that THINKING about asking someone out was a lot easier than actually doing it. Half of him wanted to run to Umber and encase him in his wings, the other half wanted to flee.

Flame steeled himself, pushing the fear away. *You're NOT going to run away and hide behind an IceWing this time. Umber deserves to know how you feel. Now get over there and talk to him!*

With a stomach full of butterflies Flame approached. He cleared his suddenly very dry throat to get Umber's attention.

The MudWing whipped around and fixed Flame with an expression that matched how Flame felt: terrified and delighted.

Umber's expression quickly righted itself and he bound towards Flame with a warm smile "Flame!" he called out and it took all Flame's strength to not melt. "I've been looking for you all day. Are you alright?"

Flame felt the guilt creep up again and he ducked his head. "Yeah, sorry about that. I just needed...some time to think." The SkyWing sighed and looked up to meet Umber's amber speckled eyes. "We need to talk."

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Author's note:

AAAH!! This is my longest chapter so far for Healed ;3 Also, thank you to Quasimagical for her RainWing Healer OC. I didn't get to use her name in the story but her name is Joy, just in case you were curious C:
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Chapter 20

"We need to talk," Flame spoke solemnly.

That doesn't sound promising, Umber fretted. *Is he going to tell me he doesn't want to be my friend anymore? That I went too far and he hates me?*

"U-um, OK," Umber sputtered out. Flame looked around, equally as nervous.

"Let's go into my room and talk," He offered and unlocked the sliding door. He stepped aside to let Umber enter first. Umber's body felt tight with tension, but once he entered the room he let out a snort of amusement.

Flame's room was a mess. His bed was a disaster; the blanket was in a giant knot and the pillow on the floor. The desk was covered in graphicolls and what looked like old food plates that the SkyWing had probably taken up from the cafeteria. The little sitting area to the left looked like a war zone as well, the two sides having been Flame versus a batch of cookies. Obviously Flame had won since all over the table and surrounding floor were crumbs and stray chocolate chips. Meanwhile the floor pillows had been pushed together to make a sort of larger seat that was also surrounded by more graphicolls.

Hastily Flame rushed in. He went over to the sitting area and pulled the pillows apart, brushing off any crumbs. "Erm, sorry for the mess," he apologized, embarrassed.

Umber was only amused. He picked up a chocolate chip off the table, examining it between his claws before tossing it in his mouth. "I'm guessing you must have baked some cookies recently," Umber reasoned aloud.

Flame blinked in surprise and then nodded sheepishly before going

to the nearby cupboards and pulling out some candles. Well, a LOT of candles. Within several moments the room was well lit with the smoldering glow of dozens of tiny fires. Umber wrapped himself in the soothing pulse of their flickering hearts like a blanket, letting it wash over and calm him.

While Flame went around illuminating the room Umber nervously fondled the gift that was tucked away under his wing. He had spent all evening working on it with Sora and Jet. Even though Jet had wanted to make it a *romantic* gift, Umber had gone with something a little more neutral. It wasn't meant to be romantic or even sappy. It was simply something he thought Flame would enjoy in hopes of smoothing things over between the two of them.

Finally the SkyWing sat down next to Umber on the adjacent pillow. The firelight gilded the ruby scales of his throat and contoured his muscles with shadows. Umber forced himself not to stare.

Don't get distracted! You came here with a purpose!

In the silence that stretched between them Umber took this opportunity to speak first. "Flame - I - I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. I'm so so so so so SO sorry I made you uncomfortable the other night but it's just-" Umber felt his face grow hot "-I think you're really cool and nice and fun and handsome and oh Moons I'm sorry if I am rambling I should probably just shut up." Having made a complete mess of the apology Umber slammed his mouth shut, biting on the inside of his cheek as he went over what he said. *Great. Six hours of practicing this speech and I messed it up. Great.*

Flame turned his eyes upwards and Umber was struck their complexity. Like rings of copper freshly pulled from the forge they burned more vibrant than any fire Umber had ever seen and it warmed him to the core.

"You didn't make me uncomfortable," Flame spoke with unusual softness, as if unsure his voice would hold.

Umber's heart skipped a beat. "R-really?"

When he had rehearsed this whole conversation in his head he had imagined Flame being annoyed but forgiving Umber in the end. In that scenario they went back to being friends and pretended nothing had happened. The MudWing hadn't been expecting this outcome.

"Um, yeah," Flame affirmed and began pulling at the loose threads on the pillow. Umber had noticed it was something the SkyWing did when he was nervous or agitated. Flame looked down at the ground and spoke again in a low whisper. "I actually kinda...liked it."

Umber was stuck silent, well, almost silent. He might have made an embarrassing squeak sound but he wasn't really paying attention. Suddenly the SkyWing squared his shoulders as a wave of determination coursed through his lithe, red body. He fixed Umber with a hard gaze, making Umber squeak again.

"Look, I'm not the best at...talking about feelings and stuff," Flame admitted. "And I'm probably going to make a fucking mess of this, but I want to be upfront with my feelings so...here goes." Flame took a deep breath while Umber held his.

"I like you, Umber...a lot."

Deep in his chest Umber felt as if the sun had risen, spreading its light and warmth all through his body and lifting him up, up, up beyond the clouds. *He likes me back! HE LIKES ME BACK!*

Umber couldn't stop the enormously stupid grin from taking over his face.

"And I am guessing from the kiss that...you like me back?" Flame hesitantly asked. Umber's brain seemed to have momentarily imploded from all the emotions coursing through him so the best he could do was nod vigorously in response.

Immediately Flame looked away, turning his face from the candle light and gazing at the floor. Umber's first reaction was that he had said the wrong thing and made Flame upset again, that is, until he saw the smile.

It shyly crept along Flame's face, crinkling the corners of his eyes and making the SkyWing seem years younger. Umber had never seen anything more perfect.

"Cool," Flame finally murmured, nodding his head as if he had just learned a neat fact.

"Yeah," Umber agreed, smiling as well. *OK, this going a lot better than I thought it would...at least for now.*

Both males were sat in silence for a bit, collecting their thoughts and trying to ease through the anxious tension that had been choking the air at the beginning of the meeting.

Maybe now would be a good time to give him the gift. OK...here it goes...

"So, uh..." Flame began, halting Umber's plan. "Does this mean we...or, what I mean is, did you want to maybe go on a date or something...with me...sometime?"

Joy swarmed his chest like a cage of birds set free. "YES!" he screamed and then clasped his talons over his mouth. "Ahem, yes. That would be great," he tried again, embarrassment flooding his cheeks red. Flame stared at him, shocked by the sudden outburst, but then quickly began to laugh. Umber let out a sheepish chuckle as well.

"So did you have something in mind?" Umber inquired once the laughter died down. Flame stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I have a few ideas," he responded vaguely.

Umber arched a suspicious brow. He may not be the smartest guy around, but Umber could tell when someone was bluffing. "You have no idea what we're going to do, do you?" the MudWing dryly deduced.

Flame sat up straight and let out an offended huff. "I do so! I have EVERY detail perfectly planned out, *thank you very much*." The SkyWing leaned back and folded his arms over his chest. "And because you're being so SASSY I'm not going to tell you anything. You'll just have to wait until the date to figure out what my

elaborately planned plan is that I definitely have planned in advance and am not going to put together last minute."

Umber stifled a laugh and playfully narrowed his eyes. "Hmm, I don't know. That sounds like something someone who DOESN'T have an elaborately planned plan would say."

"Oh really?" Flame challenged, leaning forward. "Well YOU sound like someone who is going to get proven WRONG."

Umber put his talons up in mock surrender. "OK, I'll wait and see. But just so you know, my expectations are pretty high."

Flame snorted. "Well I am amazing at everything I do, so of COURSE your expectations would be high."

The males stared at each other in silence, and then burst out laughing yet again. Even though Umber was confident that Flame was bluffing it was still cute to see him was trying so hard.

"Fine. So when do I get to go on this *amazing* date?"

Flame stifled his laughter and shrugged. "How about tomorrow after my session with Starf? We can meet in the cafeteria and go from there."

Umber agreed and, with a tentative plan in motion, the boys decided it was getting late and that they should probably go their separate ways until tomorrow. But that was easier said than done as Flame had insisted on walking Umber back to his room.

"Really, I'll be fine on my own," Umber weakly argued. He could tell the SkyWing was tired, but truth be known, Umber didn't want to turn down an opportunity to spend more time with his crush.

Flame only snorted, holding the door open for Umber to go through. "Would you just hush up? I'm trying to be romantic here so just let me walk you home!"

The MudWing couldn't refuse an offer like that.

The hallways were nearly empty at this hour and the unnerving

silence killed any urge for conversation, but it didn't matter. The males walked in content quiet, their wingtips brushing together every so often. Although the sun was down there was still plenty of illumination provided by large braziers that were evenly distributed along the interior of Flame's buildings. Soon enough they reached the end of the building and crossed over onto the bricked pathway that wound through the gardens and connected the buildings together.

These exterior pathways were lit by gentler lanterns that stood on long poles. Moths and other nocturnal insects fluttered around the light; the hum of their wings was joined by the chorus of crickets, fireflies and the distant croaks of frogs along the river bed. It broke the eerie silence and Umber breathed a content sigh. The sounds reminded him of the Mud Kingdom.

"So Umber," Flame's sudden mention of his name brought the MudWing out of his haze of memories. He tilted his head to indicate he was listening.

"Are you going to give me that present or what?"

Umber stopped in his tracts and slapped his talon on his forehead. *Oh my gosh, how could I forget! It was the whole reason I had come to see Flame...wait a second...* His thoughts abruptly slowed and he narrowed his eyes at Flame. "How did you know I had a gift for you?"

Flame stared off into the garden, extending his long elegant neck as he tried to put on an air of mystery. "I have my ways..." he cryptically answered.

"No really, tell me," Umber insisted. Flame only smiled coyly.

"Maybe I can read minds."

Umber rolled his eyes. "Flame!"

Flame put a talon over his mouth to hide his snickers. "Relax, MudWing. I just overheard you speaking with Sora in the garden earlier today."

Umber blinked in confusion, mentally retracing his steps as he tried to recall the details of his walk through the garden. Finally he gave up. "But I don't remember seeing you there."

The red dragon flicked his talon as if it was a minor detail. "Don't worry about it; I was hiding behind an IceWing."

"Oh, well in that case...wait, what?"

"ANYWAY, so are you gonna give me my gift?" Flame perked excitedly. His talons jittered with energy and he had an excited sparkle in his eye. It was like his inner dragonet had come out as he waited impatiently for Umber to react.

Umber couldn't think of a reason to deny Flame so he reached under his wing to pull it out, then paused. With a cheeky grin he thought of a better idea. "I could give it to you now, OR maybe I'll wait for our date."

Flame's wings sagged and the smallest of pouts appeared on his mouth. "But...but..." With a frustrated sigh Flame sentence faltered.

"It's only fair, right?" Umber asked before Flame could continue. "You get to surprise me, so it only makes sense that you get a surprise too."

"Yeah but I would still be surprised if you gave it to be *now*," Flame complained. Even though Umber was enjoying the cute little pout of Flame's face he did feel kind of bad for making him wait. With a sigh Umber reached under his wing to pull out the gift.

"Well if you really want it now..."

But before Umber could reveal the object Flame began to push it back under the MudWing's wing with vigor.

"I changed my mind. I don't care. Save your dumb present for tomorrow." His face was fixed in a stubborn scowl and Umber knew he was just trying to feint indifference. The MudWing could still see the impatient and eager sway of Flame's tail. Umber bit back a smile. It was so adorable when Flame tried to act tough.

"If that's what you want..." Umber played along, tucking the gift back under his wing.

"It is!" Flame insisted a little too loudly. Umber grinned and shook his head in exasperation before they continued on their way. Finally they reached Umber's door. He didn't open it right away, instead resting his head against the door he listened for any sounds within. He didn't want to go barging into the room if Sora was asleep. Luckily he heard the rustling of parchment and the clink of a tea cup being set on the table.

"What are you doing?" Flame whispered next to him, making him jump.

Flame smirked at his reaction and Umber rubbed his neck, embarrassed. "I was just checking if Sora was awake or not, but I think she's awake so that means I won't have to tiptoe around the room in the dark." He smiled.

"Oh, that's good," Flame spoke flatly. He then cleared his voice, looking rather bashful. "So...uh...goodnight I guess..." The SkyWing dropped his gaze but kept glancing up at Umber, as if waiting for something to happen.

Umber's stomach lurched as a sudden awkward silence tightened around them. *Uh-oh. How should I say goodbye? Should I give him another kiss? Does he want another kiss? Maybe a hug would be better. Or should I wait for him to initiate it first?*

After several minutes of clumsy hugging attempts and uncoordinated wing tapping Umber, in an instinctive moment of desperation, offered his talon in a friendly gesture. Flame blinked in confusion but slowly accepted the talon in his own and the two dragons parted on a firm talon-shake.

Umber watched Flame leave before gently sliding open the door and entering the room. Once inside he closed the door and then slammed his head against the wall. *A talon-shake? You offered him a TALON-SHAKE?? What is this, a business meeting? AAAAH WHY AM I SO BAD AT ROMANCE?*

"Was that Flame you were just talking?"

The amber-eyed dragon jolted at the soft voice of his sister. He turned around to see Sora sitting on one of the floor cushions to the left. She had a scroll in her talons and on the table were several large lanterns providing ample light. Umber had been able to borrow the lanterns from the library once he learned Sora liked to read late at night. He had heard from someone that reading in dim light wasn't good for your eyes. *Maybe I should see if I can get Flame some. He probably reads his graphicolls at night.*

"Yeah, it was Flame." Umber went to sit next to his sister. Beside the lanterns was a simple clay tea-pot with two matching, handle-less cups to either side. They had brought the tea set with them from the Mud Kingdom where tea drinking was actually pretty popular.

Sora quickly put down her scroll. "Well? Did he like your gift? Is everything OK between you two again?" The bubbly curiosity in her voice was not something he was used to hearing from his quiet, reserved sister but he welcomed the change.

"Actually I didn't give it to him." Umber ducked his head sheepishly.

Sora's excitement quickly turned to concern. "Why? What happened?" However her apprehension didn't last long as the shy grin on Umber's face gave him away.

"Because I'm going to give it to him on our date tomorrow."

Her face lit up and she grabbed his talons. "OHMYGOSHTHISISGREAT!" she blurted out. Umber laughed as she shook his talons in excitement. "You have to tell me what happened!"

Umber was still laughing when she released her grip on him. "OK, I'll tell you everything..."

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Flame was definitely happy. He was going on a date with Umber, how could he NOT be happy? He was honestly surprised he had managed to work up the courage to ask Umber out, but it had all
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worked out in the end.

Despite this he had only one thought on his mind as he left the MudWing's room: *Well, I'm screwed.*

Even though he was sure he had convinced Umber of his elaborate plan the truth was he had NO sweet clue what he was going to do. He knew he wanted to take Umber somewhere outside of the Healing Center, but where?

There's a town not far from here, I'm sure Umber and I could find something to do there, he thought but shook his head in frustration. He didn't want to just half-ass this date. He needed a plan and it needed to be good.

Maybe I can ask around to see what kinds of stuff there is to do in town. I can take some suggestions and make an awesome plan! Flame felt heartened at the idea, but then hissed in despair. *Shit, it's the middle of the night. Who the hell would be around that I could ask? I can't wait until tomorrow. I'll have no time.*

That's when a disturbing thought struck him. He knew who to ask.

There was only one dragon he knew for sure that would be here this late and who would also be able to advise him on what to do for a date.

With a reluctant sigh, and grumbling the whole time, Flame changed directions and headed towards the Front Desk. He had only been there once. On the first day he had dropped by to grab his welcome package before storming off to his room. It was located on the ground level in the north-most building.

Dragging his tail Flame slowly followed the paths until they led him to his destination. He crept towards the large archway entrance and peered inside. As expected, only one dragon was there: Jet. Her desk was pushed up against the back wall, illuminated by the same types of braziers that were found in Flame's residence. Taking a bracing breath he entered, instinctively lifting up his talons so they wouldn't clink on the floor.

As he got closer he could see the female was concentrating fiercely on writing something. She would pause every so often to consult some sheet and then dive back into her task. As such, she didn't hear him approach until he cleared his throat.

Flame tried to hold back his laugh as Jet nearly fell out of her chair in terror at his sudden appearance.

"WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?" she bellowed with wild eyes, clutching at her chest like her heart was going to jump out. Soon her breathing slowed and she gave Flame a dagger filled look. "What are you even doing up this late? Why aren't you in bed?" she snapped.

Now that he was closer Flame could see the desk that was covered in half-finished welcome packages for the wave of new patients arriving in the following week. The large braziers to either side cast dramatic shadows about, intensifying the sharp angles of Jet's face. Flame couldn't help but feel like a misguided hero stumbling into the evil villain's lair.

"I need your help," he admitted meekly.

Jet balked, blinking in surprise before scrunching up her face to study him. "Help you with what?"

Flame sucked the inside of his cheek, reluctant to speak. It's not that he *hated* Jet, but she was definitely on his list of top ten dragons that annoyed him...although she wasn't as bad as Squid or Fatespeaker. Besides, she was the only one who could help him. Eventually Flame released a gasping sigh of defeat. "I want you to help me plan a date for Umber."

Jet gasped then smiled in delight, her talons clenching with excitement. "DOES THIS MEAN YOU ASKED HIM OUT!? This is amazing, oh my gosh Umber was *so* worried you were mad at him but I knew you would totally-"

"Would you keep your voice down!?" Flame hissed impatiently. He just wanted to plan this date and go to sleep.

"Well excuuuuse me for being happy for you, anyway, you've come to the right place," she leaned back in her chair, slowly clasping her talons together like some sort of wise guru. Her delighted smile quickly turned into smug-ass grin that Flame was trying not to slap off.

"Yeah well, it's not like I had another choice," Flame grumbled while wrapping his wings around his frame. This was the third night he had stayed up late and his exhausted body was beginning to get chills.

Jet leaned forward in her chair and rested her elbows on the desk. She clasped her talons together, her expression softening in the firelight. "Oh don't be like that. Look, I know we like to give each other a hard time but that doesn't make us *enemies* does it?"

Flame cocked his head to the side. "Really? I thought you hated my guts."

Jet pursed her lips and began lazily tidying up her desk. "Well, I don't *hate* your guts but there are certainly times where I would like to sucker punch you in the stomach."

Flame considered this while tilting his head from side to side. He was surprised to say the least, he had been confident that she despised him. But maybe he didn't know her as well as he thought. "Fair enough," he decided. He appreciated her honesty. He hated when dragons were nice to your face but would drag your name through the dirt once your back was turned. That's how Flame had felt ever since he had gotten the scar. The forced smiles that barely concealed disgust, the whispering behind his back...the look his mother gave him when she saw his deformed face.

Flame shook these thoughts away as another chill ran through his body. "Anyway, does this mean you're gonna help me or what?" Flame brought the conversation back on topic, anything to keep his mind from wandering towards those dark alleyways.

"Well DUH!" Jet rolled her eyes. "Of course I'm going to help! Besides, Umber is my friend too. I don't want him to have a sucky date."

"Heh, yeah. I don't want that either." Flame rubbed his neck, a blush appearing on his face.

"Great, so we're on the same page." Jet showed her sharp teeth in a grin. "So, what are your ideas so far?"

Flame shuffled his talons awkwardly. "Well, I want to take him to that nearby town but...other than that I got nothing."

Jet gave an unsurprised frown. "Very well. So how about I just start of by telling you what your options are and then we can figure out what you can do for your date. Here, take these." She passed him piece of parchment and nudged the ink bottle towards him. He accepted them with mild confusion.

"What the hell are these for?"

"To take notes," Jet responded with an exasperated sigh. "You want to do good job on this date, right?"

"Well yeah!" Flame responded indignantly.

"Then *pay attention* and don't interrupt. OK, ready?"

Flame groaned and dipped his talons in the ink. He had a feeling this was going to be another late night.

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Author's note:

Jet and Flame are a prime example of what you would call "frenemies" ;3 Anyway, this chapter doesn't really have much action/drama, but we DO get to see the boys actually TALKING about their feelings instead of avoiding each other! Thanks for reading and have a great day!
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Chapter 21

Alright, deep breaths. There's nothing to be anxious about. You're just going on a date with Flame, it's not like you're having tea with the queen! Just be yourself and relax.

Umber was having a hard time keeping still as he waited for Flame in the cafeteria. An hour ago the place had been buzzing with activity as dragons rushed to get their breakfast and leave but now the place was still. Row upon rows of empty chairs at empty tables stretched from wall to wall. A few of dragons shuffled between the tables with brooms, eyeing Umber curiously.

Umber tried to look at ease but ultimately failed as he kept searching around room, waiting for Flame to appear. He shuffled his wings again, adjusting the little satchel tucked beneath the membrane that contained Flame's gift.

The more Umber thought about it, the more he wished he had just given Flame the gift yesterday. Even though he had put a lot of time and effort into making it, it certainly wasn't anything fancy. He didn't want to be getting Flame's expectations up just to see his disappointed face at the end.

No! Stop thinking like that! You're not making yourself any less nervous!

He had been waiting for less than five minutes but already the paranoia was setting in.

Did I come too early? Dang it, when did he say he would be done of his session? Maybe he got held up and is going to be late?

A hundred scenarios flooded Umber's brain until he saw a familiar lithe silhouette enter the cafeteria. The MudWing released a sigh of relief as Flame spotted him and, with a large grin, came bounding over. The relief soon turned to butterflies as his heart began to pound to the rhythm of Flame's steps.

"Hey, MudWing," Flame greeted, giving Umber a playful shove. "Ready for the best day of your life?"

Umber shoved back, matching Flame's confident smile. It was hard to be anxious when Flame was smiling.

"I was *hatched* ready." Umber squared his shoulders and clenched his talons in dramatic determination. Flame snorted in amusement before letting out a massive yawn.

"Sorry," Flame apologized and shook himself from snout to tail. "I got up early today to do some gardening."

Umber's ears flickered in confusion and he scrunched up his snout. "You were *gardening*? Since when do you *garden*?"

Flame groaned and lifted his wings in exasperation. "It's this stupid punishment thing I have to do for ditching Ibis that night. Usually I go in the evenings but I thought it would be better to get it out of the way for today." He then perked. "BUT the good news is that I just have to do it for a week and I don't have to have that crazy bitch around."

Ah, so that's why Ibis isn't around anymore. Umber had been there when Zephyr had essentially told Ibis to 'get lost' but he hadn't realized the SandWing had been permanently removed from Flame's presence.

"Anyway, enough of this boring chit-chat. Let's get going!" Flame insisted while he eagerly began to nudge Umber out of the large archways.

"Alright, alright! I'm going." Umber laughed and swatted Flame's pushy talons away. As they headed out to the garden Umber couldn't help but notice how excited Flame seemed to be. "So does this good mood of yours mean you have a plan all made up?" The MudWing smirked.

Flame released on offended huff. "Well *I told you* I did! Honestly Umber, if you keep giving me that attitude of yours I am going to have to teach you a *lesson*."

The suggestive lilt in the SkyWing's voice made Umber trip on his own talons. When he righted himself he was blushing intensely. "What do you mean by that?"

But Flame wasn't listening. He was focused intently on a sheet of parchment brimming with chaotic scribbles. When he saw Umber staring he hastily tucked it away. "Just checking the plan one last time," he explained shyly.

Umber cocked his head, curious but eager. "Well then what's first on the agenda?"

Flame flashed Umber a toothy grin. "We're going to go drink some disgusting hot leaf juice."

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On the other side of the mountain, about a ten minute flight, was the large town only known as The Capital. It wasn't a big, expanding circle like most cities; rather, it was more like a giant snake made of buildings and lights, slithering its way up the mountain's face, layering its body over itself like an infinite 'S'. SkyWings from all over the kingdom came here to do business, and the layout of the town reflected this.

With an aerial view Umber could see the tourist district that made up the head of the snake. It was the highest point of the city both literally and economically; tall hotels and inns for visitors as well as restaurants, boutiques, and shops filled the area. Conversely, at the lowest part of the mountain was where the industrial part of the city was located. Chimneys belched out thick columns of smoke from what he assumed were from the forges of blacksmiths.

But in-between the tourist and industrial area was the largest part of the city where most of the locals went. That district was where the food markets were located, and where all the local businesses set up shop.

Umber silently followed Flame as they circled around the city a few times. The SkyWing was focusing intently on the ground below, trying to find something. Finally he let out a triumphant WHOOP
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and pointed towards something in the tourist district.

"Finally I found it! Um, I mean..." Flame tipped his nose up and gave a scoff. "I knew where it was the whole time. I just made us fly around the city three times for...exercise...yeah."

"Riiiiiight. Of course you did." Umber raised a skeptical eyebrow at Flame. The red dragon pretended not to see and the two dragons started their descent.

They alighted down in what Umber could only assume was sort of alternative universe were imperfections didn't exist. The walkways were made of a perfectly pristine cobble stone road. Not a single brick was chipped or out of place. In fact the whole area was the picture definition of so-perfect-it-was-kinda-creepy. Every building had a perfect paint job, crystal clear windows and little flower baskets hanging outside their doors.

A few SkyWings walked by wearing pendants that were shaped to look like a crown held around their neck by deep purple ribbon. It was an indication that they were wealthy merchants and Umber knew the colour represented the region they were from but he couldn't remember which region had which colour. He had learned all these useless facts from various SkyWings he had fought alongside. One had been a merchant's son. Umber couldn't remember his name.

The merchant SkyWings politely nodded at Flame and Umber before walking into a nearby building.

Once they were gone Flame let out a low whistle. "This place could give the Ice Kingdom a run for its money with its level of snobbiness."

Umber laughed in agreement, hiding his unease. *This is a pretty fancy part of town. What if I make an idiot of myself and Flame becomes embarrassed to be seen with me? No. Stop thinking like that. It's going to be fine.* Umber gulped down his fears and followed Flame as they approached a one story building with a large patio out front. Dragons sat at tables shaded by frilly umbrellas, sipping at elegant porcelain cups. Above the large double-doored entrance

was a sign painted in shimmering gold. Umber could tell there were two words and he tried sounding them out.

"T-E-A. H-O-U-S-E." He thought for a moment, feeling the sounds on his tongue and trying to connect them with words he knew. "OH! Tea house!" He finally realized as a surge of excitement coursed through him. He nudged Flame, impressed. "So you weren't kidding when you said we were going to drink hot leaf juice. I thought you hated the stuff."

Flame sucked in a breath, looking determined. "I'm an open minded dragon...I'm sure there is SOMETHING I can drink that won't be terrible."

"Wow, how optimistic of you," Umber dryly noted.

The two boys made their way towards the building. Flame reached out to pull the door open only to have them open before them by a jaunty SkyWing with a bow-tie around his neck. The waiter looked them over once and put on a jubilant smile, although Umber could practically smell the haughtiness wafting off of him.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Do you have reservations?" His tone seemed to suggest that they most certainly *didn't*.

Umber shuffled uncomfortably. He leaned towards Flame. "Let's just go somewhere else. This place is dumb anyway." The uptight vibes coming from the building put Umber on edge, not to mention he wanted to get Flame out there before he tackled the waiter to the ground and got arrested.

But instead of leaving Flame wrapped a wing around him, pulling him close. Umber's cheeks burned hot as Flame addressed the waiter with a smug snarl.

"Actually yes. We do have reservations." Flame's voice was gruff with annoyance. Its coarseness made Umber shiver. "It should be under the name Flame."

With pursed lips the waiter reached for a clip board under his wing and scanned the parchment. A few second later he looked up again,

embarrassed. "Ah yes, here you are. Right this way." With a bow the dragon motioned for them to enter the building. Much to Umber's disappointment Flame released him from his wing's grip and ushered him inside.

The interior was just as posh and he expected it to be. The walls were a deep oaken brown, the floors made of polished orange sandstone and the furniture was tasteful and elegant. The waiter led them into a side room that had large windows that provided an ample view of the street outside and allowed the gentle breeze to roll in. They were placed at a low table near the window that had silken cushions for them to sit on. With new found politeness the waiter left some menus on and parted with a bow.

Flame fluffed up the floor pillow before plopping down with a content sigh. "Oooh, these are comfy."

With more reservation Umber sat down on his own pillow across from Flame, his smooth scales gliding over the soft silk. He had to admit, it was pretty comfy.

"Wow," Umber looked around the room, his eyes passing over the sophisticated artwork on the walls and equally sophisticated dragons sitting at the nearby tables. One of them met Umber's eyes and he didn't at all appreciate the way they looked him over, as if he didn't belong. The MudWing dropped his gaze and turned to Flame. "This place is fancy. How the heck did you get reservations?"

"I have connection," Flame informed, inspecting his talons nonchalantly.

Umber folded his arms across his chest. "So you mean Jet helped you."

The SkyWing jolted and looked to Umber in surprise. "Wha- How did you know?"

Umber shrugged innocently. "Maybe I can read minds," he said, using the same line Flame had used on him. But truthfully, it was only logical. Umber knew Jet was the go-to person for making reservations for inside *or* outside the healing center. Not to mention

Umber *seriously* doubted Flame had connections.

Flame struggled to hold back his smile at Umber's pert answer. "Touché, MudWing. But yeah, I did ask Jet to help. Apparently this place has some sort of deal with the Healing Center?" Flame gave a confused shrug. "All I know is that patients get their first five pots of tea free so as long as I don't have to pay then I'm happy." He smiled at Umber, making the MudWing's heart pound, before grabbing the two page menu and skimming it over. Flame's face twisted into a disgusted scowl.

"Yuck, these all look gross."

"Did you even *read* what any of them say?"

"I don't *need* to. I already know they'll be bad," Flame retorted and Umber only rolled his eyes. He picked up his own menu but then heaved in disappointment. He kept forgetting he didn't know how to read.

A small wave of shame passed over him. *This is so stupid. I drink tea all the time in the Mud Kingdom but I can't even* read *what any of these are. I should have practiced more-*

His thoughts were cut off as soft scales rubbed against his own and he was engulfed in warm, red wings.

"Need help reading the menu?" Flame's rough voice hummed through his core. The SkyWing was pressing himself against Umber and the MudWing struggled to hide the shivers running along his spine as well as the abrupt spike in temperature.

"Yem. Yeth. *Ahem*, YES!" Umber finally managed to gain control of his tongue and speak his answer. His cheeks were burning as Flame smirked. *What is WRONG with me today? I've talked to Flame hundreds of times but all of a sudden it's like chewing rocks. Uuhg I must look so dumb.*

Umber buried his face in his talons but let out a small gasp as he felt Flame pull him closer.

"Hey, uh, don't get embarrassed. Everyone gets tongue-tied

sometimes. It's not a big deal." The SkyWing gave Umber lopsided smile of reassurance.

Umber mirrored Flame's expression and took in a slow breath. "Yeah, I know. I guess I'm just a bit nervous." That was certainly true. Umber had been both petrified and ecstatic for this date to happen, although the cause of his jitteriness right now had more to do with Flame's warmth pressing against him than his nerves. "I mean, this is pretty much my first date ever."

Flame breathed out a taut laugh. "Heh, yeah, I'm kinda nervous too actually." The SkyWing looked away, staring at a nearby plant as if he wanted to hide behind it. "I really don't want to screw this up."

In that moment Umber could see the doubt and anxiety as they seeped through Flame's eyes. The SkyWing had been so confident this whole time, but now Umber realized he had just been hiding his self-doubts and fears. This was all so new to both of them, yet Flame had taken up the role of planning the whole thing, even going so far as to drink tea just because he knew Umber liked it.

Umber would never be able to express with words how much he appreciated Flame at that moment. "You haven't screwed anything up." With gentle talons he reached up and cupped Flame's face, pulling the scarred dragon's gaze back towards him. Umber's eyes traced his features, his distinct jawline, the slight tilt of his orange eyes and the way his scar traveled up his snout like purple vines crawling through ruby leaves. Umber could even differentiate which part of the wound had been caused by Viper's tail, and which part had been the result of the spreading poison. Finally Umber's gaze completed its journey and fell back on Flame's desperate eyes. With his hand still on Flame's face Umber leaned in. "Thanks for setting all this up. It was really sweet of you."

Flame swallowed hard. "So...you're having a good time? I'm not messing everything up and making a total idiot of myself?"

Umber tenderly stroked Flame's cheek, a warm smiled pulling at his lips. "I'm having a *great* time."

Their snouts were mere inches away. When had they gotten so

close? Umber didn't remember. He didn't care. All that mattered was the heat of Flame's breath on his scales as slowly they drew together...

"Are...uh...you two ready to order?"

The embarrassed voice of the waiter jolted the males apart and they began to unnecessarily and loudly clear their throats while grabbing the tea menu.

"Erm, I think we'll need a few more minutes, thanks." Umber sent a polite smile towards the waiter who nodded and eagerly retreated. Umber's face was still flushed hot and his heart was pounding but he was finally coming out of whatever trance he had been in. Flame seemed to also be coming back to his senses. Their eyes met and they both hastily looked away.

"So. Tea," Flame spoke, tapping the menu with his talons.

"Yes," Umber agreed with the conviction of someone in a deep conversation.

"Yep."

"Yeah."

It took a few moments before the sparks settled down, but eventually, after more one worded sentences, Flame began reading through the menu and both of their thoughts went back to tea.

Umber listened carefully as Flame went through the different sections. They had plenty of black and herbal teas, but Umber was also pretty impressed with their rooibos and oolong selection. Of course, Flame didn't pretend to understand or even care for the differences.

"I don't care what you choose, just as long as it tastes good," he instructed, eyeing the menu with evident mistrust.

Umber got Flame to read the menu to him once more and Flame loyally, and without even *one* complaint, read the entire thing again. The MudWing recognized all the teas, and had tried most of

them, or something similar, in the past. But since this was Flame's first time he picked out several *newbie* teas that were simple and clean, as well as some other ones he thought Flame would like.

After a few moments the waiter hesitantly returned to take their order and, to Umber's delight, offered them a plate of pastries for them to enjoy with their tea once it arrived...although he had a feeling they would be gone long before the tea showed up.

Flame picked up a powdered tart and gave it a sniff.

"This better be free!" he grumbled before tossing the whole thing into his maw.

Meanwhile Umber was trying not to drool all over the table. He picked up a perfectly flaky rectangular pastry that smelled of chocolate. He took a huge bite but underestimated how much filling had been inside as the chocolaty cream burst out of the crust fell onto his talons and the table.

"Oofs," Umber mumbled through a full mouth. He swallowed the morsel with a large gulp and licked his talons clean before scooping up the glop of chocolate on the table with a claw and licking it up.

Flame laughed and shook his head before passing Umber a napkin. "Wow. Classy."

"Shut up." Umber took the napkin and smooshed it around his face, hoping to remove some of the mess.

"You missed a spot," Flame simpered, pointing to a spot on the tip of Umber's snout. The MudWing used the back of his talons to wipe it off. When he was finished Flame laughed and gave him a thumbs-up, indicating he was all cleaned.

But he wasn't the only one laughing. Umber's ears perked as he heard some snickering from the table beside him. On instinct he turned towards the direction of the sound. It had come from the two SkyWings, a male and a female, which had eyed Umber disapprovingly when he had first entered.

They had glimmering red scales that looked more polished than the

floor, an abundance of jewelry hung off their necks, wings, and ears. Gaudy bracelets jangled as they hit the sides of the teacups which they were holding with pinkies raised. When Umber turned towards them they quickly looked away, covering their mouths.

They had been starting at him. No, they had been *laughing* at him.

Umber shook his head. *No, they weren't laughing at you. They probably don't even care. Just enjoy your date with Flame and forget about them.*

He turned back to Flame who had stuffed a mini muffin into his mouth. "Do you think we should save these for when our tea gets here?" he said after a hearty swallow.

"Nah!" the brown dragon exclaimed before taking a bite from a small pie. The crust was flakier than expected and fell apart at his bite. He quickly picked up the pieces that had fallen on the floor and stuck them in his mouth.

The laughing picked up again, less restrained than before. Umber jerked his head towards the sound to see the female covering her mouth while the male was whispering something in her ear, both had their eyes on him.

Hot shame burned through him and he quickly set his pastry down, his appetite lost. Flame noticed his change in temperament immediately. "Umber? Is everything ok?"

"Yes. Fine," Umber snapped, and then backtracked. "Sorry. I'm fine." He gave Flame an apologetic smile but accidently shifted his gaze back to the couple to see if they were still looking at him.

Flame noticed and whipped around to face to see what Umber was looking at. By now the couple had mostly gone back to drinking their tea, although they would look at Umber and giggle. Umber slid down in his cushion, just wanting to disappear.

"Are they...*laughing* at us?" Flame asked, a dangerous growl lacing his voice. In the blink of an eye Flame's muscles became taut with tension and his warm orange eyes were replaced with burning pools

of fury.

Oh mud slides, Umber swore . Only now did he remember how much of a sore spot this was for Flame. The SkyWing was always so paranoid others were laughing at him. This wasn't going to end well.

"It's fine. Just ignore them," Umber urged, pulling at Flame's arm. "They're laughing at *me*, not you."

This did not calm Flame, in fact, Umber was pretty sure it had made him angrier.

"*Ignore* them? Like hell I will!" He wiggled out of Umber's grip and stood up, smoke coiling from his nose and mouth. "I'm going to teach those shit-heads a lesson."

Oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no, Umber chanted in his head as he chased after the smoking dragon. "Please, you'll get in trouble again!" Umber tried to reason with him, but it was too late. He was already in front of the couple, ears back and a deep growl rumbling in his chest.

"Oh...hello. How may I help you?" the female spoke, her voice nasally and polite.

Flame didn't respond. He simply swatted her tea cup right out of her grasp. It shattered on the floor, its spilled contents forming a puddle. Umber felt his stomach clench. *Oh Flame*.

"How rude!" she exclaimed, aghast.

"Don't *pretend* to be all polite," he snarled. "You *assholes* were laughing at my boyfriend!"

As terrible as this situation was, Umber's heart skipped. *He called me his boyfriend!*

The two posh dragons looked at each other and then to Umber, whose bubbly joy quickly vanished and he tried to make himself as small as possible.

The male gave a pretentious snort. "Calm down, my boy. It wasn't malicious. We were just so amused by the MudWing's...*interesting* table manners." Both dragons smirked, choking back laughter.

"Yes. I've never seen anyone eat pastries so...*violently*." The female giggled and turned to Umber. "Tell me, in the Mud Kingdom do you usually eat things off the floor?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," the male murmured and a chorus of chortles followed between the couple.

In any other situation Umber would have spoken up and defended his Tribe... or at least he liked to think he would have, but right now he was too distracted by Flame. The SkyWing was fuming and practically trembling with rage, ready to explode at any moment.

"Flame..." Umber whispered, resting a talon on the red dragon's flank. He desperately needed the SkyWing to calm down. "Let's just go...please, I don't want you to get in trouble again."

Flame didn't budge but his ears flicked, indicating he was listening. Umber spoke again, trying to sooth the SkyWing as much as possible. "You're *better* than this Flame. They're not worth it." He nuzzled the red dragon's chin. "Let's just go. Please."

After several tense seconds Umber heard Flame release a shuddering sigh, the tension in his body unwinding. "Yeah. You're right. This place is dumb anyway."

Umber released his own sigh of relief. No one was getting attacked or arrested today. But then again, the day was still young.

The MudWing turned to walk away, but paused when Flame didn't follow. "Uh, Flame. Aren't we leaving?"

"Yeah, just give me a sec." His voice was tight and he turned back to the SkyWing couple. Umber's eyes widened. *Oh Moons, what is he doing NOW?*

"I don't know how they eat pies in the Mud Kingdom," Flame began, a menacing lilt in his voice, "but I think everyone should eat off the floor at least once in their life-" With the swiftness of a striking

alligator Flame took the plate of pastries on the couples table and flung it towards them. They had been sitting close together, so both were hit as cakes, muffins and pies became air born, hitting them in the face, wings and getting all over their jewelry.

On instinct the couple immediately stood up, wings flailing and tipping over the table as they tried, and failed, to stop the rain of desserts. In this chaos Flame ran to Umber, his eyes glittering with excitement. "We should go...like, RIGHT NOW!"

Umber didn't need to be told twice. With mischievous glints in their eyes the boys bolted for the door and out into the streets.

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Author's Note:

So for some reason when I started writing this I thought "Oh sure, I should be able to fit the whole date into one chapter"...Don't worry, I have since come to my senses ;3 Also, hopefully Flame won't get arrested by the end of this date.
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Chapter 22

It hadn't even been an hour and Flame's plan was already in chaos.

They were *supposed* to have been spending a relaxing morning drinking hot leaf stuff in which Flame would have impressed Umber by being super sweet and open-minded. But *NOPE*.

Instead those two shit-heads at the Tea House had to ruin everything by being shit-heads. It had taken every inch of Flame's will not to set their table on fire. He had felt the sparks igniting in his throat, begging him to open his maw and let the burning justice do its work.

It had been Umber's gentle touch that had stopped him; it had cleared his mind and stunted the anger before it had taken over. Now, as they fled from the scene of the crime, wings pumping and hearts pounding, he could feel the shallow sting of guilt. Guilt in himself for almost losing it...again.

Come on, Flame. You're better than this! He mentally repeated what Umber had told him, but honestly he wasn't so sure that was true. Maybe this was as good as it got.

Flame stiffened his wing as a hard gust hit him from the left. The winds on this side of the mountain were much more finicky but easy enough to handle with a SkyWing's wingspan. Flame checked behind him to see how the MudWing was doing. Umber was wobbling from the force of the wind but seemed to be keeping up just fine. He also cast a glance back in the direction they had come from, making sure no angry, cake-covered dragons were following them.

Even though Flame did feel guilty about almost losing it, he didn't take all the blame. Those prissy pampered piles of shit had it coming.

The two males headed towards the middle district, where all the local shops were located. As they approached from the air Flame could tell right away it was nowhere *near* as organized or clean as the stuck-up tourist district. Little shops were set up all over the winding streets as they slithered down the face of the mountain. Somewhere in the middle of the district was the day market that sold all sorts of foods, both raw and cooked, and as they flew over a pungent smell assaulted Flame's nose. The scent was that of various foods being sold from the street vendors mixed together with the strong musk of dragon that came off the stampeding crowds below as they clogged the walkways and roads.

So this is the big food market that mother used to always talk about. Flame felt a whip of spite run through him. *Hrmph, it's not THAT great. Like, definitely not so amazing that you would leave your dragonet behind with the Talons of Peace while you went off to look at the shops!*

Every time he had confronted his mother for leaving him she had always said the same thing: You'll understand when you're older.

He still didn't understand. In fact, he doubted there *was* anything to understand. It had all been bullshit. She had just wanted him out of the way.

"Where are we going?" Umber shouted, trying to penetrate the whirs of the winds as it whistled past their ears.

"Uhh..." Flame scouted around for a spot to land. A little further down from the day market was a smaller congregation of shops that were pushed tightly together along the narrow street.

Compared to the market next door this little street was virtually empty, save for a few dragons here and there, bustling about with bags full of goods or whatever the hell they needed. Flame directed Umber's attention to the spot and they touched down on the gravely dirt road.

"Do you think we were followed?" Umber asked, looking to the sky. Flame assumed he was worried about the dragons from the restaurant giving chase, but when Flame turned to him to answer

he couldn't help but notice the mischievous twinkle in the MudWing's eyes.

"No. I think we're fine," Flame answered before smirking. "Besides, they're probably too busy scrubbing the chocolate out of their jewelry to care about us."

Umber snorted in agreement, covering his mouth with his talons to hide the giggles. "I *still* can't believe you actually did that! You should have seen the look on their faces!"

The SkyWing barked out a laugh. "I know! By their screams of horror you would have thought I was trying to kill them or something." Flame mimicked the high-pitched squeal the male had made after getting hit in the face with a scone. They burst out in rowdy laughter, earning them a few curious glances from the nearby dragons.

Flame took a few deep breaths, trying to smother the spasms in his chest. "I'm surprised you think it's so funny," he told Umber, who was also trying to stop the onslaught of giggles. "Shouldn't you be telling me that I was *wrong* to do that? You're supposed to be my moral compass here!" Flame shook his head sadly. "I can see I've been a bad influence on you."

The MudWing scoffed. "Yeah well, they kinda deserved it. And that whole place made my scales crawl to be honest," he said and wrinkled his snout in displeasure.

Flame shuffled his talons, dragging them through the dusty sand that made up the streets. "So...you're not too upset that I ruined the tea tasting thing?"

Umber swished his tail as if using it to brush away the whole incident. "It's fine. Besides, I've got plenty of teas back in my room. If you still wanted to try some we can go back there later and I can brew you up a batch!"

At the thought of drinking tea Flame instinctively grimaced, making Umber laugh. "Just think about it, OK?"

Honestly Flame was probably going to say yes. The idea of spending time with Umber outweighed the disgust that went along with drinking the hot leaf juice of doom. Not to mention Umber's hopeful pout was wearing him down to the bone. "Yeah, OK. I'll think about it," he finally admitted coolly and Umber lit up.

"Awesome! I think I have a few teas you're really gonna like!"

Flame tried to keep his cool demeanor, but it was pretty hard to not grin like an idiot when Umber was smiling that adorable smile of his. "Sure, if you say so."

Umber nodded then spun around a slow circle, taking in the scene. "So where are we? I'm guessing this part of town doesn't sell any food."

As usual, the MudWing was correct. Especially when it came to matters of food. Flame took a quick glance around at the square wooden buildings that were built to securely latch on to the mountain's course surface. They certainly looked stable, although they were uglier than a skunk's arse. Unlike the touristy district, the buildings in this area were much less protected from the violent winds. Years spent on the face of a mountain had peeled the paint right off the wood and any SkyWing worth their wings knew better than to put decorations on their house in case the wind should decide to take it and never give it back.

"I dunno, looks like some shops or something," Flame half-heartedly suggested. He pulled out his little piece of parchment he had strapped to the underside of his wing. It was his master plan that he had made up with Jet. The plan that was already falling apart, but Flame was determined to salvage what he could.

I spent half the fucking night making this. I'm not throwing it away yet! He skimmed through the chaotic mess of notes and scribbles that fought for dominance on the white paper battle field. Finally his eyes located the list he had made:

1) Go to tea house. Impress Umber with your open-mindedness. Try not to throw up when drink tea.

Flame shook his head. That step had obviously failed. Now it was time for the next phase.

2) Take Umber to the food market. Use money mother gave you to get some good. Note: Jet recommends clay pot place.

Right. The food place next. Flame put the list back under his wing, trying to remember the directions Jet had given him.

OK, so if I go through the entrance next to the hat booth, I just need to make two lefts and a right and I should end up in the food court.

"Alright, Umber. Let's go get something to eat," Flame announced, only to realize Umber wasn't standing in front of him anymore. A moment later he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the familiar muscular body a few meters away peering into the window of a nearby shop. At the sound of his voice Umber turned around.

"Food?" he repeated, ears perked and eyes sparkling.

"Yes. Food," Flame reiterated, amused. "Now let's hustle. I'm hungry."

"SAME!" Umber agreed.

By foot the two dragons made their way up the steep incline of the winding streets until, a little out a breath, they reached the main entrance of the market. It was distinguishable by the swelling crowds of SkyWings that were passing in and out, carrying foods and groceries along.

"That's a lot of dragons," Umber noted. There was a shakiness to his voice that made Flame pause.

"Is... that alright? Do you still want to go in? We could find somewhere else to-"

"No, it's fine! Really," Umber insisted, twisting his tail-tip between his talons. "It's just...getting smooshed by large crowds like that makes me kind of anxious." The MudWing stared with obvious unease at the mass of dragons within the market.

Flame understood; he wasn't looking forward to diving into this stream of bodies either. Not really knowing what to say to make it any better, Flame simply leaned against Umber, offering his warmth. He felt the MudWing shiver so he wrapped a wing around his as well.

Flame released a sigh. What was the point of following a plan if it made Umber unhappy?

"Screw it. Let's find somewhere else to eat," Flame decided. "There are restaurants all over the place, we'll find somewhere else to go."

Umber blinked before creasing his brow wearily. "Wha- Are you sure? Really, I didn't want to ruin your plan-" The MudWing's sentence abruptly cut off with a squeak as Flame pulled him close.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

Umber blushed as a smile pulled at his mouth. Gently he rested his head against Flame's cheek, making the SkyWing shiver this time.

"Thanks," he whispered.

Even though they were in a public area Flame really didn't want to pull away so, despite the curious and displeased stares, they sat resting against each other for several minutes before Umber shuffled. The MudWing pulled his head back to look at Flame.

"Um, Flame...I just was thinking...did you mean what you said in the Tea House? That I'm your... *boyfriend*?"

Flame recalled the scene and flushed. He hadn't even realized he had said it, in the heat of the moment it had slipped out...probably because he had wanted it to be true.

At the same time, however, Flame knew he would be moving things too fast. *Calling him my boyfriend pretty much makes this a serious relationship but I promised Starf, and myself, that I wouldn't do that.*

As much as Flame wanted to say 'yes' he knew he had to be honest. He swiveled his head around to look for a more private place to talk. He spotted the hat booth that Jet had mentioned. It was sidled

up next to another shop that seemed to be closed. The area had a few lingering pedestrians but was mostly quiet. "Follow me," Flame instructed, leading Umber towards the vacant area. Once they were there and Umber was sitting, Flame took a deep breath.

Be honest with him. He deserves to know how you feel.

"Umber...I would love for you to be my boyfriend...but I don't think it's a good idea."

The worried crease in Umber's forehead lifted in surprised and then lowered again in confusion. "Why is it a bad idea?" There was a smidgen of defensiveness in his voice.

Flame heaved another sigh. It was hard talking about all this feeling shit and he was starting to feel a choked wobble in his voice. "I just think you deserve better than what I can give you right now. I don't want us getting too serious until...until I can be less of a piece of shit I guess."

Umber was shaking his head slowly, eyes as wide as the sky. "Flame..."

"No. I mean it!" Flame put a stop to whatever sweet thing Umber was probably going to say. "There are a lot of things I want to change about myself. I just..." he paused, clearing his throat to get rid of the annoying shake of his voice. "I just want to be the best me I can. So..." The scarred dragon scrapped his talon along the ground nervously. "I know it's a lot to ask, but...I really don't know how long it's gonna take me to get to that point. And...well...would you be willing to wait?"

Flame felt a huge weight lift off his chest only to be replaced by pounding anxiety as he waited for Umber to respond. The MudWing took a step closer, leveling his eyes to meet Flame's. His gaze held nothing but warmth as his mouth curled into a lopsided smile. "Of course I'll wait. However long it takes I'll be here." Swiftly the brown dragon touched his nose to Flame's and continued to lean forward until their foreheads were touching.

Both dragons trembled as the scent and warmth from the other

washed over them. Flame's whole body buzzed with relief and light.

"Hey! You two! Quit your smooching!"

The boys slid apart as the angry merchant at the hat booth shouted at them. He was a wrinkly old SkyWing with a droopy mouth...or maybe he was just doing an extreme frown. Flame noticed he wore one of those crown pendants that was held around his neck by a green ribbon.

Flame hissed. "Mind you own business, old man! We weren't even kissing!" Although the idea made Flame's lips tingle.

The hat-merchant threw his talons in the air. "Bah, whatever you were doing GO DO IT SOMEWHERE ELSE!"

Flame rolled his eyes and nudged Umber. "Fine, let's go get that food. We'll come back later and graffiti his booth." He said the last part extra loud so that the merchant would hear. The reaction did not disappoint.

"I'D LIKE TO SEE YOU TRY YOU HOODLUMS! JUST YOU WAIT UNTIL I SMACK YOU WITH MY CANE!" The old dragon began climbing out of his booth, cane in talon. With frantic wings Flame and Umber quickly took to the sky, leaving the cantankerous merchant on the ground, shaking his talons at them at shouting more threats.

"Flame!" Umber shouted as they coasted on the rough breeze, trying to sound stern but failing. "Stop getting us chased out of places!"

The SkyWing released an unrestrained laugh. "Yeah, but then our lives would be so boring!"

The soared over the bustling market below, far away from the suffocating herds of dragons and aromas that wafted on the breeze. Once they passed the chaos below they approached another area of the district where the buildings were spaced further apart.

They had the same general design as the shops: plane, wooden and tightly secured to the side of the mountain. They were, however, much larger and instead of being filled with supplies for purchase

they were stuffed full of tables and mats for dining.

Finally, they had found where all the restaurants were.

Their talons touched the ground and they eagerly took in their options. It was still a little early for lunch, so most of the eateries had plenty of open seats.

Umber hummed as he looked around. "I don't know a lot about SkyWing foods, where should we go?"

To be honest, Flame didn't know much about SkyWing foods either. He had spent his life with the Talons of Peace who hadn't been all that focused on the teachings of SkyWing culture.

"Uuum..." Flame inspected the restaurant names, quickly sorting through which ones Umber might like.

Gusty's Noodle House. *Nah.*

Dark Bean Coffee Café. *Ugh, coffee is even worse than tea!*

The Mountain Side BBQ and Grill. *Hmm...maybe...*

Sky-High Clay Pot Dining. *OH!*

Jet had recommended the clay pot place in the market but this one was probably just as good. Jet had given him a little explanation on what it was since he had had no idea. Apparently it was a simple SkyWing dish where rice is cooked in a clay pot until it is *almost* done, and then meats and vegetables are added in and the whole mixture is left to cook until the rice is ready.

It was simple and hearty, and hopefully enough to fill a MudWing's gut.

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The restaurant was small but the numerous tables that had been smushed into every corner implied it was often busy. They were passed menus by a burly SkyWing who only seemed to communicate through various grunts and shrugs. They chose a table
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near the front of the restaurant. Unlike the soft cushions of the Tea House, the seating here consisted of thin mats.

Once again Flame read Umber the menu and, as expected, Umber tried to get the cheapest thing on the menu.

"Well, the vegetable one sounds good, and it's only costs a couple of coins."

"Yeah, but vegetables suck," Flame pointed-out. "Just get the meat one. I know you want to."

Umber shuffled uncomfortably. "Yeah but, I don't want to be a bother." The MudWing ducked his head, but Flame knew he must be hungry. He was pretty sure Umber had to eat every couple of hours or else he would probably die or something.

Flame huffed. "Listen. My mother gave me this money to spend and, knowing me, I am probably going to waste it on something dumb like candy or a feathered hat. So please, help me get rid of this money before I do something stupid with it."

This made Umber snort in amusement. "Fine. I'll save you from poor decision making skills."

"Thank you!" Flame grinned back. "So is one dish going to be enough for you? And be honest! If you lie to me I'll know and THEN I might just have to set you on fire."

Umber laughed again and then tapped his talons together. "Well...I could probably eat more than one dish..."

"So two?"

"Er...well..."

"*Three?"*

"Yeah, that sounds like a good amount...but only if that's alright!" Umber quickly asked, looking embarrassed and guilty. The last thing Flame wanted to do was make Umber feel bad about how much he ate.

"It's no problem, MudWing. Don't worry about it," Flame urged. "In fact, I'd actually be pretty impressed if you managed to eat it all."

"*If?*" Umber quoted, offended. "You shouldn't underestimate me. I'll have you know I once ate two entire cows in twenty minutes."

Flame bit the inside of his cheek, trying to hold back a grin. "Not bad. I once ate three dozen cookies in fifteen minutes." Finally the grin slipped out as he remembered the event. "My stomach hurt for the entire day but it was *so* worth it."

Umber placed an elbow on the table and rested his cheek against his talon, staring at Flame with those deep brown eyes. "I like it when you talk about stuff you did growing up. You hardly ever mention what you did as a dragonet."

Flame blushed and unconsciously began tearing at the menu, ripping the thin paper. "Erm, well I guess it's because it was pretty boring. I just hung out with the Talons of Peace, but I was too young to do anything so I just stayed in the camp and played by myself." Now that Flame actually was telling someone this, he realized how pathetic it sounded. "But it was fine! I mean, I missed my mom a lot but other than that..." Flame trailed off.

Other than that it still sucked. He had hated every moment his mother was away. The other Talons of Peace members only thought of him as a burden, so he had hidden himself away, reading graphicolls and wishing he was someone else.

He missed his mother now, too.

I wonder if she ever came to this restaurant while she lived here. Did she hang out in the market place and buy groceries? Did she ever go to the Tea House or to the coffee shop? Is this where she met my father?

A gentle tug on his tail snapped him out of his memories. Umber and curled their tail-tips together tenderly while placing a brown talon over Flame's as it rested on the table. "Are you OK? You seemed to have zoned out for a moment."

"Yeah, I'm fine...well...maybe not so fine actually. I still haven't

heard back from my mother and it's almost been a week," Flame admitted. He tried to be logical about it. Mail was slow, it would sometimes take two weeks for letters to arrive...or maybe she didn't care and would never send a letter back. Flame pushed that last thought away, but he knew it was pointless. As much as he tried to get rid of them they kept coming back. The unescapable dread that his mother didn't love him anymore, and with it, the anger that his deformed face was the reason.

But deeper still was an even darker thought. A thought that made his heart harden and seeped all the warmth from his bones.

That maybe...his mother had never loved him to begin with.

Umber squeezed his talons and Flame finally looked up to see Umber's concerned face. "I'm sure she'll get back to you as soon as she can. Try not to worry about it," The MudWing advised. Flame nodded, not bothering to mention that he couldn't control his worrying.

Feeling that the atmosphere was a little tense, Flame attempted to ease back into the conversation.

"Ahem, so, do uh...do you spend time with your mother much?"

Flame blinked in surprise when Umber let out an amused snort. "No. Not at all actually. MudWing's don't really *do* parents."

Flame furrowed his brow, trying to wrap his head around the information just given. "But... who takes care of you?"

"We take care of each other," Umber announced proudly. "Sibs learn to rely on each other quickly after hatching. Sometimes our mother and her sibs would show up to teach us basic hunting skills but after the first few months we are on our own."

Flame couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had no idea MudWing's did that. It was kind of impressive but also sad in a way, at least to him. "So...do you even know your mother's name?"

"Of course I do!" Umber said defensively. "Her name is Cattail."

"And your father?"

Umber's defensiveness dropped and he rubbed his neck awkwardly. "Oh...well I actually don't know his name."

The red dragon nodded in understanding. "Yeah, I don't know my father either. I mean, I know his *name* but that's only because my mom told me. She...doesn't like to talk about him for some reason." The mysterious figure of his father had always captured Flame's imagination. He has used to think that maybe he was a superhero and had had to keep his identity a secret to protect him. Or perhaps a spy?

But as Flame got older a more likely scenario was that he had died in the war or something and it just made his mother sad to talk about it.

Umber squeezed his tail around Flame's as a comforting gesture. "Have you ever thought about going and looking for him?"

Flame leaned forward, resting both elbows on the table and slouched his shoulders. "All the time...or at least I used to."

Their conversation was cut short as the grunting SkyWing came back for their orders. From what Flame could interpret, their food would be ready shortly. Umber thanked him sweetly and, once they were alone, turned back to Flame.

"I still feel bad about spending all your money. I'll make it up to you on our next date."

On our next date. This made Flame smile boldly and he gripped Umber's talons. "It's a deal."

The front door, which was behind Flame, swung open aggressively. Flame swiveled his head around to tell the entering dragon to 'keep it down' but felt his voice catch as he recognized the familiar mahogany-brown MudWing.

"Oh *shit*," Flame hissed, quickly turning around and pulling up his wing to block his face from the view. Luckily the mahogany dragon wasn't even paying attention, which didn't come as a surprise. He

was talking to one of the cooks.

"Why are you hiding? Who is that?" Umber whispered, watching the other MudWing cautiously. Flame put a talon over his mouth to *shush* him and watched as his old accomplice, someone he had hoped to never see again, eagerly took a huge take-out bag and quickly left the building without giving Flame so much as a glance.

Once he was far away Flame dropped his wing and released a sigh.

"So *now* will you tell me who that is?" Umber asked while also watching the dragon as he disappeared into the bustle of passing shoppers.

Flame rubbed his face, reluctant to share but he knew he had to tell Umber.

"That was Ochre," he mumbled into his talons, loud enough for Umber to hear but just barely. "He's the dragon that helped me steal the dream-visitor."

Chapter 23

"What's a dream-visitor?" Umber asked as their food was brought to the table. The smell of cooked sausages and fatty meats made him instantly salivate as the aromas danced around in his nose and mouth, but he held back. The expression on Flame's face indicated now was not the time to start gulping down food.

The SkyWing rubbed his face again before dropping his talons back on the table. Umber fought the urge to reach out and hold them.

"It's an animus thing that lets you visit dragons in their dreams and talk to them," the SkyWing droned with a grim expression.

"And that dragon," Umber jutted his chin in the direction Ochre had gone, "helped you steal it? From who?" Umber was trying to understand this. Why would Flame want to take some creepy animus touched thing? What was he hoping to find in the dreams of other dragons?

The red dragon squirmed and his talons twitched with nervous energy, searching for something to tear at. "I...uh...stole it from Starflight when we were trapped in the NightWing's Kingdom," Flame spoke quickly as if hoping that if he said it fast enough Umber wouldn't hear it.

But at the mention of Starflight's name something clicked in the MudWing's mind. *Oh! Ochre...I recognize that name now. Clay told me about him. He was supposed to be some sort of backup version of Clay or something. So weird...*

Umber always felt a chill run up his spine when he thought of the NightWing Kingdom and what the NightWings had to endure. It must have been terrifying for Flame, to be thrown into that world of smoke and darkness, not knowing where he was or what who to trust. Umber could just imagine how horrible that must have been for the SkyWing. But it still didn't answer his other question: *why?*

Why would Flame need something like that?

"Listen," Flame's urgent voice snagged Umber's attention. "I don't want you to think I stole it because just because I wanted someone else's stuff. I took it because..."

With nothing to tear at Flame's claws had begun gauging lines into the wooden table. Releasing his self-restraint Umber reached forward past the still warm pots of food and grasped Flame's antsy talons. He gave them a comforting squeeze, encouraging Flame through his touch.

The SkyWing's scarred maw curled up into a grateful smile. He squeezed Umber's talons back and breathed out through his nose in a sigh. "I did it because I wanted to talk to my mother, to tell her where I was and to come get me but...I really had no idea where I was, and every time I went into her dreams they were so confusing." His gaze dropped and he stared blankly at his cooling pot of rice. "I could never find her."

"But you found her eventually," Umber gently offered. "And you got to go home."

"But then she sent me away again!" he spat, the sudden venom in his voice made Umber jolt. "She sent me to that fucking Academy with all those shitty dragons...uh," he quickly backtracked, "...excluding you and Sora of course."

Umber snorted. "Wow, thanks. I'm really feeling the love."

Flame shrugged helplessly. "You should know by now that I don't know shit about talking romantic. Would you prefer if I had said something like *oh Umber, from the moment I laid eyes on you I knew that someday...we would probably get kicked out of a Tea House together."* Flame's voice oozed with flowery praise as he batted his eye-lashes.

Umber, who had just taken a small bite of his meal, immediately began to choke as the laughs filled his chest and throat. Flame started laughing too, but then had to go over and pat Umber on the back as he continued to choke on his amusement.

"Don't die on me, MudWing! Your sister and Jet will kill me."

This only made Umber laugh more, but luckily he had hacked up most of the rice already. Through teary eyes he gave Flame a thumb up, indicating he would live. Flame exhaled in relief. "I didn't realize how lethal my flirting was." Instead of returning to his own seat Flame looked around and swiped a nearby mat from another table and squished in beside Umber.

"I should stay close...in case you need more lifesaving." He slipped his silky wings around Umber's muscular frame. Umber could never explain it, but somehow being encased in that thin, warm membrane made him feel like he was wrapped in armor. Completely safe and untouchable.

"Yeah, good idea." Umber couldn't hide the blush spreading over his face. There was just something about Flame's scent and warmth that made his head foggy. It certainly didn't help when Flame leaned closer, touching their noses together and nuzzling the burn mark on the tip of Umber's snout.

Umber melted into the embrace, closing his eyes and focusing on the smooth scales rubbing against his own.

I could stay in this moment forever.

But his stomach had other ideas.

At that moment it decided to release a primal war cry so loud it shook his bones and rattled his teeth. Umber was pretty sure a marching band falling down a staircase would have made less noise.

This time Umber blushed in mortification, pulling away from Flame. "Ah, um, sorry I-"

The MudWing's embarrassment evaporated when Flame barked out a laugh and pulled him into a half-hug. "For Moons' sake, Umber. If you were that hungry you should have *said* something! I would have shut up and let you eat."

But I like listening to you, Umber wanted to say, but he was currently getting a pot of food stuffed towards his face by Flame.

"Let's eat before you trigger an avalanche with your stomach," Flame teased and Umber returned the favour with a half-hearted scowl. It was hard to even *pretend* to be mad at the mischievous SkyWing. Still sitting next to him, Flame pulled his own bowl over and began to eat.

Umber made short work of his meal. In the time it took Flame to finish one bowl Umber was done of his three. However, this might have been due to Flame's slow eating. From the corner of his eye Umber had watched Flame play with his food, taking little bites and sometimes just staring at it. Despite all the laughs and jokes they had just shared Umber could tell Flame was still upset about seeing Ochre.

I really want to ask what he's thinking about, but maybe it's best to just leave him alone for now. He didn't want to upset Flame by asking him too many questions and so far he had learned that patience was required with Flame. He would speak when he was ready.

After they finished their meals Flame paid the bill and, much to his delight, even had some money left over.

"What should we spend it on?" he asked as they left the restaurant and stepped into the hot light of the afternoon sun. Umber shielded his eyes with his wing as he looked around, adjusting to the bright halo of the sun. The lunch crowd was just starting to grow. Line-ups were beginning to develop for a few restaurants as customers waited to be seated. It seemed that they had finished just in time.

"You could always save it," Umber offered. Flame rolled his eyes.

"Pfft, yeah right. Let's find a bakery and gets some dessert!"

"Didn't we already have dessert at the Tea House?" Umber articulated. Flame merely shook his head in exasperation.

"Are you saying you can't handle a second dessert? And here I thought I was talking to the dragon that ate, not one, but TWO cows in twenty minutes." Flame tutted, "It's like I don't even know who you are anymore."

Umber groaned through a smile and thwacked Flame with his wing. "Oh, *I* can handle it just fine. It's *you* I'm worried about. Mr. I-ate-a-batch-of-cookies-and-got-a-tummy-ache."

"Hey, it was *three* batches!" Flame sputtered while laughing. Umber's own shoulders were shaking in silent heaves as the two walked with wings brushing.

It was just their luck that they found a bakery on the other side of the street. They entered the little hut, a bell ringing as they opened the door. Even though Umber was stuffed full his mouth quickly began to salivate again at the smell of freshly baked cookies and pastries. All around the small shop were tiered trays that were shaped like pine trees, having larger trays near the floor but slowly narrowed as it reached the ceiling. And every single one was full of muffins, cupcakes, cookies, biscuits, pies and really every type of dessert you could ever think of. It was a forest of sweets and sugar. A tear of joy snuck out and wedged itself in the corner of his eye.

"It's beautiful," Umber whispered, wiping the tear away before it fell.

"Yeah, but where's the owner?" Flame wondered aloud before calling out: "Hellooooo? Is anyone here?"

Umber had been so concerned with the food he hadn't realized they were the only ones there.

"I'm here! I'm here!" a female voiced called out from behind the counter at the back. There was a door behind the counter where, to Umber's surprise, a plump SandWing emerged, covered in flour and wearing an apron over her chest. "Sorry!" she gasped, her voice soft and cheery. She gracefully rounded the counter, careful to not knock over any of her delicious trees. "I was just putting some cookies in the oven." As she spoke she wiped her talons on the front on her apron, the red fabric streaked with a white powder. She smelled like chocolate and powdered sugar. "My name is Poppy. What can I get you?"

The shock at seeing a golden face after a day of non-stop SkyWings made Umber paused and he inadvertently ignored her question.

"I didn't expect to see a SandWing up in the mountains," Umber exclaimed before realizing that might have come off as rude. "Not that that's a bad thing! The more the merrier!"

"Yeah, you're the first SandWing I've seen outside the Healing Center," Flame added.

The baker perked. "Oooh, you two are from the Healing Center? Have you met a SandWing by the name of Ibis by any chance?"

Umber stiffened and watched Flame from the corner of his eye. The SkyWing had his lips pursed, tailing coiled around his feet. "Yes, we've...met," he simply said. The SandWing, luckily, seemed to not notice the tension in his voice and nodded enthusiastically.

"That's great! She's my sister. After the war we both wanted to get out of the Sand Kingdom so we thought...hey, why not the mountains?"

It seemed like as good a reason as any.

"Wait a second, hold on," Flame blurted out, brow creased and snout in a scowl. "You're Ibis' *sister*? But you're nothing alike! You're all rainbows and sunshine while she's a b-"

Umber jabbed Flame in the side, willing him to not say something obscene. The SkyWing paused finishing his sentence with: "...and she's...not those things."

Wow. Very smooth, Flame.

Poppy let out an awkward chuckle. "Yeah, my sister has more of an...aggressive personality you could say. But me, I just wanna put smiles on dragon's faces by stuffing them full of sweets. Speaking of which - " She spun around, motioning to all the tiered trays of desserts that filled every corner of the room. As she completed her spin she smacked one of the towers but caught it before anything fell off. "So what would you boys like? I pretty much have everything so go wild."

Umber scanned the room, eyes full and overwhelmed.

So many options. I could try a piece of cake, or a tart? OH is that a chocolate stuffed croissant? It all looked good. Too good. Umber looked to Flame for help but he was equally as overwhelmed. He offered Umber a useless shrug.

"Uh...do you have any recommendations?" the MudWing asked Poppy. He figured the professional would know best.

A satisfied smile curled on her lips. "I was hoping you would ask that. Wait here." She whisked away behind the counter and into the back room she had been when they had first entered. A second later she emerged with a tray of enormous chocolate muffins.

"I've been working on these bad boys for a week. They're my own special recipe," she boasted, setting the tray on the counter in front of the drooling males. "They're made with chocolate batter, stuffed to the brim with chocolate chips, chocolate fudge chunks and sliced almonds and hazelnuts. I call them Mud-Muffins."

Umber smacked his lips as he took in their glory. "They're beautiful."

A nudge in his side broke his trance as Flame leaned towards him, a devious smile spread over his maw. "That could be a pretty cute nick-name for you: Mud-Muffin."

Umber laughed and pushed Flame away playfully. "There is *no way* I am letting you call me that!"

Flame staggered from the push and righted himself by splaying his wings. He smiled coyly and leaned in again, this time his voice a low growl. "Well what are you gonna do to stop me, *Mud-Muffin?*"

The question was laced with a seductive challenge that made Umber's whole body feel hot and tingly. "Uhh..." Umber struggled to speak.

Flame's fiery eyes were fixated on him, muting his voice and mental tongue so that all he could think about was how close Flame's face was to his. And what it would feel like have those gorgeous red scales on top of him.

An awkward cough made them both look up. Poppy was blushing furiously and avoiding eye contact while quickly stuffing two of the Mud-Muffins into a paper bag. "So...did you want these muffins to go?"

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The boys found a wooden bench outside the bakery. With contented smiles they sat down and devoured the heavenly mess that was this monstrous Mud-Muffin. If Umber had been full before he was completely stuffed at this point. And covered in chocolate. Luckily Flame had snagged some napkins before the left.

"How do you always manage to get more food on your *face* than in your *mouth*?"

Umber took the napkin and dabbed his face daintily. "Years of practice." He winked.

While Umber licked his talons cleaned he watched Flame meticulously separate the muffin into two parts, first eating the top half and then the bottom. Quietly they watched the crowds pass by. Ever so slowly Flame scooted closer to Umber until their arms were touching while Umber reached out with his tail and entwined it with Flame's.

They sat in blushing silence, lost in thought and leaning against each other.

While one part of his mind was just content to sit there and surrender to his senses, another part was still wrapped up in ideas of animus magic, volcanoes and NightWing prophecies. And from the way Flame was frowning and staring at the ground Umber figured the SkyWing's attention was focused on that as well.

"Still thinking about Ochre?" Umber asked. He knew it was a sore spot for Flame, but he didn't want to just leave the SkyWing alone with his thoughts. Flame nodded.

"Last I heard he had joined the Talons of Peace," he continued with a thoughtful expression. "So maybe he's here for official Talons of
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Peace business...although why they would send him is beyond me." Flame grimaced. He really didn't like this Ochre guy.

Umber shrugged. He didn't know a lot about the group so he couldn't really give any useful insights. "Well maybe he didn't come along. He might have others with him."

Flame's eyes widened and he straightened his spine. "You're right. Maybe other members are with him. Maybe-" he trailed off, every scale on his body vibrating. "Maybe my mother is here too!" His orange eyes seared with a hope so fierce it was heartbreaking.

"She must have come to see me! She's probably looking for me right now," Flame went on, not stopping to consider the alternatives. By now he was off the bench and pacing, his gaze frantically darting about as his thoughts went wild. "What if she's waiting for me at the Healing Center? We should go back-"

Umber tried to pull him back, to settle him down and reason with him.

"Slow down! We don't even know if he even *is* here with other members. He could just be here alone." Umber got off the bench as well, approaching Flame and gently grabbing him by the shoulders so they faced each other. He touched their noses together briefly. Umber was sure he was never going to get tired of that rush he felt when they touched. "Just don't get your hopes up, OK?"

For a moment Flame looked as if he had just been struck in the face, but eventually he released a reluctant sigh. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

Easier said than done. By the way Flame's tail coiled anxiously Umber knew he was fighting to keep his mind reasonable. "But...what if she *is* here?" Flame's voice swelled. Even though Umber highly doubted Avalanche was here he couldn't bear to see Flame like this.

"Well, if you really want to know if your mother is here, then maybe you could find Ochre and ask him."

Flame scowled and pulled his wings in close to his body. "Ack. No thanks. The thing is...we didn't really leave on the best of terms. He's a dopey idiot that only ever thinks about himself and his stomach and I'm, well, not the friendliest guy around." He gestured to his peeved scowl and general unfriendly demeanor as evidence.

"However..." A flicker of an idea danced across Flame features. "*You* could go and talk to him."

"*Me*?" Umber squawked. This conversation just had just taken an unpleasant turn. "What would I say to him? I don't even *know* him." This Ochre guy hadn't seemed all the friendly from what Flame was telling him. Just because they were both MudWings didn't mean they would automatically have some sort of bond that would make it less awkward.

"Just...pretend you're a good friend of my mother. Ask if she is with him or something," Flame suggested. Umber shook his head in protest.

"But I've never met him, how am I supposed to explain that I know he is from the Talons of Peace?" There were too many holes in this plan. Flame rolled his eyes.

"Pfft, I doubt he'll ask."

Umber thought for a moment. "I suppose I could always say Clay told me..."

"See! There you go! Problem solved. Now let's go and find him-"

"Wait wait wait!" Umber dug his heels into the ground as Flame grabbed his arm and began to pull him towards the streets. "How do I explain I was able to recognize him if Clay only *told* me about him? What if he asks how I met Avalanche? What if-"

"Umber," Flame spoke softly, his eyes pleading. "I know this is crazy and I *know* this is a shitty plan but...please? I *need* to know if she's here."

Flame's request tugged at his heart and in an instant his reluctance vanished. If this was what Flame wanted then he would do it. The

MudWing released a sigh.

"OK. I'll do it." He then looked up at Flame with a coy smile. "But I better get a batch of cookies out of this!"

Flame pulled him in for a tight hug, pressing his mouth against the MudWing's ears in a low growl. "Don't worry. You'll be rewarded."

While Umber devoted all his concentration to keeping his heart from leaping out of his throat, Flame grabbed his talons and pulled him back towards the streets.

It was time to find Ochre.

Chapter 24

The search didn't take long at all. Just as Flame had suggested they quickly scouted all the restaurants and food booths. Within twenty minutes they found the lumbering dragon near a pretzel stand ordering pretty much everything on the menu.

Keeping low to the ground, a pointless action that made them *feel* stealthier, they slinked passed the stand and ducked behind a nearby cluster of boulder near the edge of the cliff. Umber peered off the ledge to see that at the bottom of the cliff was another street, or rather, the same street as it winded back and forth down the mountain's face.

A hiss from Flame caught his attention and they peaked their heads up over the boulder to watch as Ochre took his food and immediately wolfed it down, much to the disgust of nearby civilians.

Umber's brows lifted in surprise and concern. *I know I have no right to judge but, wow. Didn't he just have a huge take-out order from the clay-pot place?*

"OK, there he is," Flame whispered and turned to Umber. "Ready to initiate Operation Vertigo?"

"Operation Vertigo?"

"Yeah, I just made it up now. Plans always go better when you have a cool name for them."

Despite the nervous knot in his chest Umber laughed. "Did you read that from a graphicoll?"

Flame pointed an accusatory talon at Umber. "Hey! I'll have you know graphicolls are a great source of information for all aspects of life, *thank you very much*."

Umber batted Flame's talons away, beaming ear-to-ear. Why was Flame so adorable when he geeked out about graphicolls? "Can't argue with logic like that," he teased.

Flame grinned back, no doubt realizing how silly this all was. "Alright, we can talk about graphicolls later, which reminds me, I still need to show you the rest of the series. I think we only got to the third issue-"

"Flame. Focus!"

"Uh, right." Flame peeked up over the boulder once again, his eyes smoothly tracking a moving target. "He's on the move. It looks like he's going back towards the market. We need to talk to him before he enters, otherwise we'll never find him."

Umber gulped and nodded. For some reason the idea of talking to Ochre was making him so nervous. *Maybe it's because of all the lies I need to keep track of. What if I mess it up? I just want to help Flame figure out if his mother is here or not, why does it have to be so complicated?*

On swift talons they followed Ochre, dodging behind anything if he so much as slightly turned towards them. This included signs, booths, stalls, and even a few confused groups of dragons. All the while they kept a close eye on the mahogany dragon as he approached every food stall. Eventually he stopped at a booth passing out cups full of steaming liquid that smelled of apples and cinnamon. Umber guessed it was some sort of cider.

"I think this is our best shot," Flame spoke as they hid themselves behind a row of stacked tables pushed off to the side. "Are you ready?" He turned to Umber.

The cold pounding of Umber's heart said 'no' but he silently nodded anyway.

"I'll be right here if you need me. Good luck!" Flame wished him before giving him an encouraging nudge forward. On shaky legs Umber approached the Ochre from behind. In addition to the cup of cider he had also purchased several sugar cookies being sold at the

station as well. *How much treasure does he have to be buying all this stuff?*

Umber shook the question away. This was no time for distractions.

When Umber was directly behind the other MudWing he took a deep breath and cleared his throat to get his attention.

It came out as a minute cough that went completely ignored. He tried again, this time reaching out and tapping Ochre on the wings. "*Ahem*!"

The false-dragonet whipped around, several crumbling cookies stuffed in his drooling maw. "Hmmph?"

For a moment Umber froze, completely forgetting everything he was supposed to say. Luckily he was given time to recover while Ochre choked down the cookies with several large gulps of the cider. When it was all down his gullet he wiped his mouth with the back of his talon and belched loudly.

Umber grimaced slightly. *I hope that's not what I look like when I eat.*

"Do you want something?" Ochre asked impatiently. Umber snapped himself to attention.

"Er, yeah. Y-you're with the Talons of Peace, right?"

Ochre narrowed his eyes. "How did you know that? Have you been watching me?"

See, Flame? I knew he would ask that question! he silently scolded the SkyWing. Luckily he was somewhat prepared. "Oh, well I'm Umber. Clay's brother. He, uh, told me about you." Umber smiled as innocently as possible.

"Clay, huh?" Ochre licked his teeth, trying to get all the cookie bits out. "I didn't know he even knew my name. OK, so what do you want?"

Umber didn't let it show how relieved he was that Ochre had believed him. He had to keep going. "Um, well I was just wondering

if there were any other Talons of Peace members with you."

"Why do you care?"

"Hmm, yes, well, you see..." Umber felt himself grow flush with anxiety. He recalled the lie Flame had made up. "I'm good friends with a Talons of Peace member named Avalanche, so I was wondering if-"

"Wait, you're friends with Avalanche? *Flame's* mother?" Ochre butt in. He inspected Umber again, this time with a bit more scrutiny.

Umber felt his throat tighten as he tried to improvise another lie. "Uh, we fought together in the war..."

"She was a spy, she wasn't on the battle field," Ochre pointed out. Panic was setting in. Umber's judgement was becoming erratic.

"Who cares about the details?" he snapped. "Would you just tell me if she is here or not?"

Perhaps Ochre was simply surprised by the outburst, or maybe he just didn't care enough to follow up on Umber's shady story. Either way, he scoffed and shook his head. "No, she's not here. I only came with Squid and Nautilus."

Umber felt his heart plummet. He knew how disappointed Flame was going to be. Although, the names 'Squid' and 'Nautilus' seemed to be stirring something in the back of him mind, but he couldn't put a talon on it. Umber pushed those thoughts aside for now. *Maybe I can still get some information on her to give to Flame. Maybe an explanation for why she hasn't sent back a letter yet.*

"That's too bad, I was hoping to see her again," Umber let his genuine disappointment come through. "Do you have any updates on her? What has she been doing lately?" He tried to sound like he was simply eager to find out more about an old friend. He was surprised by Ochre's abrupt snort.

"More like *who* she's been doing," he commented, making Umber balk at the forwardness. "From what I heard a little while after Flame left she found herself a mate. Heh, looks like Flame might

have some competition for her attention."

At that moment Umber was quite surprised at how much he wanted to smack Ochre. "I don't think that's true at all!" Umber became defensive. "She wouldn't ditch Flame for some new love interest."

Ochre shrugged. "You're apparently a good friend of hers, so I guess you would know more than me. Maybe *you* can explain then why she didn't come with us to go to that hospital that Flame's at."

Umber furrowed his brow. "You mean the Healing Center? Why are you going there?"

"I don't care what it's called and that information is Talons of Peace business."

The war is over, what 'business' do the Talons of Peace even have anymore? Umber wondered, but he had gained some more information. Ochre and those other two dragons were going to the Healing Center. Maybe those other dragons would know something.

"Listen, whatever-your-name-is..."

"It's Umber."

"Whatever. I have to leave. If you have any more questions ask someone else." Ochre grabbed a few more cookies off the counter before he pushed past Umber and disappeared into the crowd, his robust frame swallowed by the red current of SkyWings. Umber was relieved to see him gone. The whole encounter had left a bad taste in his mouth. *What a charming guy. Not.*

Before Umber could even gather his thoughts Flame came bounding over, his scales bristling with anticipation. "Well? Is she here?"

Umber felt his heart sink down to his tail as he faced Flame with a somber expression. "I'm so sorry Flame, but no, she's not here."

The SkyWing's whole energetic demeanor seemed to melt off. His shoulders and wings sagged while his wide, hopeful expression drooped with disappointment. His eyes began to glisten. "Oh," his voice wobbled. "You were right. I shouldn't have gotten my hopes

up."

Umber's chest tightened as he watched Flame hold back tears. He hadn't realized how much Flame had had his heart set on seeing Avalanche. In one loving motion he used his wing to pull the SkyWing close; cradling the scarred face between his talons he pressed their foreheads together. Flame responded by taking a shuddering sigh, leaning his head against Umber's.

"Heh, I don't even know why I'm so upset." Flame swallowed hard before aggressively rubbing his eyes with his knuckles. "It's not like I had any reason to expect her or anything. I guess I just thought..." His trembling voice trailed off. He continued to gauge his eyes red before Umber reached up to pull his talons away. With gentle strokes Umber whisked the tears away.

"It's OK to be upset," Umber whispered, meeting Flame's gaze. The SkyWing's eyes were red from abuse, his eyelashes clumping together from the moisture. "I know you miss her, just..." Umber struggled to speak. He wasn't Starfish or Zephyr. He had no idea what to say in situations like these.

"Just...have patience. She could be having problems that we don't know about." *Or a boyfriend we don't know about.*

Flame scoffed and beneath his wings Umber felt the SkyWing's muscles tense. "But it's been *three fucking weeks* since I came to the Healing Center and I haven't heard a damn thing from her!"

Flame wiggled out of Umber's embrace. His choked sobs had turned into sharp, angry huffs. "Not even a 'how are you doing?' or 'I miss you'. Nothing!" He kicked a nearby pebble with his front talon, sending it ricocheting to the other side of the street. The angry glint in his eyes weakened and he released a sigh, slumping once again. "It's just...I'm starting to think..." Pain seared across the SkyWing's features. In this moment he seemed so fragile. A delicate shell of the fierce dragon Umber usually saw him as.

Tentatively Umber approached him and rested his tail-tip on Flame's shoulder. "Just what?" he probed.

"Just...what if she sent me here to get rid of me? What if she doesn't want to see me anymore?"

Umber silently shook his head, using his wing-thumb to lift Flame's chin towards him. "Of course she wants to see you again!" Umber was simply saying the most comforting thing he could think of and hoped it was true. He didn't know a lot about parents, but in other tribes there seemed to be a strong bond between mother and hatchling. "She loves you, Flame," Umber finished gently.

Flame released a harsh scoff. "Really? Did she ever *really* love me?" He jerked his chin out of Umber's grasp. "If she *loved* me so much then why the hell did she always leave me behind or push me away? Did she take one look at me at hatching and go 'meh, I could do better'?" His voice was cold but there was a fierce desperation behind it, a burning desire to know *why* this was happening to him. Umber didn't have the answer.

Or did he? Ochre's comment about Flame's mother, as rude as it was, could explain her strange silence while Flame was here. Maybe she *did* have some boyfriend now that was taking all her attention. Umber could stand here and go on and on about how she would never do that, tell Flame everything he wanted to hear, but would he just be lying?

I should just tell him what Ochre said. He's not going to like it but he should still know. Umber opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. A second thought had seized his voice right from his throat.

What if he was just making Flame upset of for nothing? For all he knew it could be nothing but rumours that Avalanche was with someone. Mere gossip. Umber had no proof that Ochre had been telling the truth. Would he just be causing more trouble by passing along this misinformation?

Indecision held his tongue, but finally he decided to give his most honest answer.

"I'm sorry, Flame. I wish I could tell you what you want to know, but only your mother can answer those questions." The MudWing

rested his chin and Flame's shoulder in sympathy. He knew it wasn't what Flame wanted to hear, but at least he hadn't lied.

Beneath Umber's chin a shudder passed over Flame. It wasn't like the ones they had shared before, where a tender touch or loving nuzzle sent trembles through the body. This shudder was cold and every muscle it reach tensed, becoming hard and rigid until it reach the SkyWing's jaw, locking it in a hard grimace.

"You're right," Flame voice was low. "Only *she* can answer me." His eyes were fixated forward above the crowds and towards the sky. For a mere second they seemed to gleam with wrathful confidence before switching back to his normal fierce stare.

If Umber didn't know any better, he would have thought Flame had just come to an important decision. "Uh, Flame? Are you alright?" Umber poked the SkyWing's face with his talon. Flame gently batted Umber's probing talons away and tugged at the MudWing's ears in relation.

"Relax, Mud-Muffin. I'm fine."

"Hey!" Umber laughed, covering his ears protectively. Although it relieved him to see Flame's mood lifted, the sudden change in temperament made Umber uneasy. He watched Flame carefully from the corner of his eye, looking for any signs of the previous sullenness that had painted the scarred dragons face; but whatever moment of anguish the SkyWing had been experiencing seemed to have just vanished like it had never happened. *Very suspicious... What's going on in that head of his?*

"Are you sure? You were pretty upset there a moment ago."

"And now I'm not," he plainly informed as if it were a simple comment on the weather. Umber didn't buy it for a second, but whatever decision Flame had made it was obvious he didn't want to share. He tried not to feel offended; Flame was entitled to his secrets.

"Well, if you're sure..."

"Absolutely!" Flame beamed and wrapped Umber in a half-hug. "But let's head back to the Healing Center. I don't want to hang around town if *Ochre* is on the loose."

"Mmhmm," Umber hummed, still highly suspicious but slowly being won over by Flame's smile. "But what about your elaborate plan? You worked so hard on it..."

Flame's expression dropped mournfully and he pulled out the piece of parchment from under his wing. In that instant Umber was reminded of the gift he had beneath his own wing. He had yet to give it to Flame.

"Yeah, I did work hard on it." Flame gazed lovingly at the paper for a few seconds before tearing it up and throwing it to the wind.

Umber's jaw dropped. "Flame! You're plan – why did – but –"

Flame shrugged. "It served its purpose, but now I want to do something else."

"Uh...OK. And what is that?"

"Hmmm, well, how about we...*I can't believe I'm saying this*...go back to your room and drink some tea?"

Umber gasped, hopping from foot to foot in excitement as his previous concerns evaporated. "Really!? You want to try some of my teas?"

A small smile crept onto Flame's face. "Yeah yeah, just don't get your hopes up that I'll *like* any of them."

Buzzing with new found energy Umber pumped his wings, ready to go. "OK! Let's head back then! I already have a few in mind for you to try."

As they lifted into the sky, the wind gliding over their scales as their wings sliced through the breeze, Umber finally realized something. "Wait a minute!" he called to Flame. "Did you just call me *Mud-Muffin*!?"

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Author's Note:

Hi friends! So next chapter will be the end of the date, and don't worry, I didn't forget about Umber's gift!

I hope you enjoyed the chapter ;3
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Chapter 25

They returned to Umber's quiet abode by mid-afternoon. Merry sunbeams passed through the wide open window and a breeze barely stirred the curtains. While his room was nowhere near as chaotic as Flame's, it still wasn't *perfectly* clean. He had forgotten to make his bed that morning with all the excitement of meeting Flame for the date. It looked even messier next to Sora's tidy nest, with her scrolls stacked meticulously on the night-stand next to it. Luckily he had at least cleaned up the sitting last night before bed.

As soon as they entered Umber offered Flame one of the floor cushions to sit on while he prepared the tea. "Ready for your first tea experience?" Umber asked with a grin as he went over to the shelves where the tea-pot was stored.

"I guess it depends on what you're going to make me drink," Flame answered, eyeing the tea-pot like it was full of poison. Umber rolled his eyes as he took out the pot and set it on the counter. Next he went to get the tea. Standing on his talon tips and stretching his body upward he reached the top cup-board and sifted through bags upon bags of tea. They had labels on them but that didn't help him all that much. Instead he relied on smell. He had come to recognize teas by their unique fragrance and, although he didn't want to brag, could distinguish a caffeinated and decaf chai just by smell.

Quickly he sniffed out the bags he wanted, setting them on the shelving below until he had a selection of five. "I don't understand why you hate tea so much," Umber chatted while shutting the cupboard doors.

As he climbed down he noticed Flame's gaze lingering on his form, grazing along the arch of torso, his eyes burning with unspeakable temptation. The SkyWing's gaze flicked up to meet Umber's and he quickly looked away, blushing furiously at having been caught.

The MudWing had to steady himself on the shelving as a dizzy wave

hit him. No one had ever looked at him like that before. It was exhilarating.

"U-um, so why do you think tea is so horrible?" Umber tried calmed the fluttering in his stomach with conversation. He opened one of the bags and took out the little scoop inside used to measure serving sizes. "What traumatic dragonet-hood experience did you have to make you hate it so much?"

Flame shrugged, his blush fading. "I think it was because of this SandWing who was part of the Talons of Peace while I was growing up. He always had a flask with him and every time I asked him what was in it he said it was tea. So one day when he wasn't looking I took a sip." The SkyWing shuddered. "It was awful! It burned going down, like drinking lava or something. And it smelled *horrible*."

The MudWing paused what he was doing and slowly looked back at Flame, trying to hide his giggles. "Uh...Flame?"

Luckily Umber didn't need to finish the sentence as realization dawned on the SkyWing's face. "That...wasn't tea I drank, was it?"

"No, I don't think it was."

Both of them burst out in laughter, neither stopping until they were clutching their sides in agony at the stitches. After they caught their breath Umber went outside quickly to get some water from the pump and returned in haste. He had already bound the loose tea into thin fabric liners, folding them up into a little tea filled ball which he then plopped into each cup.

Using his fire-breath he boiled the water and poured it into the two waiting mugs. Steam rolled off the edges like a bubbling cauldron, and using a spoon he gently stirred the tea balls around until the water became tinted light green.

"Alright, ready to question everything you know about tea?" Umber passed the handle-less cup to Flame who took several cautionary sniffs of the liquid in front of him. The SkyWing paused and narrowed his eyes before performing a few more quick sniffles.

"This just smells like peppermint," he noted, seeming confused.

"Well yeah, it's peppermint tea." Umber set his cup down on the table to let it steep. "It's good for digestions."

As Umber sat down on the adjacent floor pillow he heard the crackling of paper beneath his wing. Inhaling sharply he remembered what it was. *Crocodile spit! I forgot to give Flame his gift.*

He had been hoping to give it to Flame sometime while they were in town, maybe while they were eating or just walking around. He didn't want to make a big fuss about it.

It wasn't even that great. Sure, he had worked hard on it with Sora and Jet but now he was nothing but jitters thinking about Flame's reaction. Would he like it? Would he just *pretend* to like it and secretly think its dumb?

"Everything alright? You got quiet all of a sudden," Flame spoke in between taking itty bitty sips of his steaming drink. Each time he would dart his tongue out of his mouth several times like a snake, his brow creased in intense concentration as if trying to detect something malicious.

Umber couldn't help but chuckle. "Would you relax? It's tea, not poison."

"You can't prove that," the SkyWing insisted, taking another sip. An instant later Umber heard him yelp as he quickly set his cup down and began fanning it mouth. "OW. DA HOT." His sad tongue was hanging limply from his mouth. It had a red burn mark over the top, making the taste buds pop up in irritation.

Umber winced. "Do you want me to get you some cool water?"

Carefully Flame put his tongue away, rolling it around in his mouth to test its sensitivity. "Nah, I think I'm okay," he paused, grimacing. "I burn my tongue all the time. I'll just walk it off."

The MudWing scrunched his face in confusion, the tips of his mouth tilting up in amusement. "I didn't know that was something you *could* walk off."

Flame shifted in his seat, leaning back and flashing Umber a suave smile. "When you're as tough as I am you can."

"Suuuuuuuure," Umber humoured, taking his own cup off the table. He blew on it gently, scattering the ebbing steam and took a bracing sip. The gift beneath his wing suddenly became uncomfortable. It pushed against his wing membrane awkwardly, begging to be removed.

He set his cup down, taking a breath. *Just give it to him! He won't hate it. Do it now!*

Umber reached beneath his wing, pulling the scroll out from the little satchel strapped along his side. Flame immediately sat up straight when he saw it, his eyes glowing with anticipation.

"Is that what I think it is?" he whispered. His excitement was both endearing and nerve-racking.

"I hope you like it."

Flame carefully accepted the scroll, turning it around in his talons before opening it. "Did you buy this?" he asked, running his talons along the parchment.

"Erm, no, I made it." Umber blushed at Flame's impressed nod.

The SkyWing slowly opened it up and froze, a small gasp parting his lips and widening his eyes. "It's a graphicoll!" He beamed, an unhindered and joyful smile pulling at his mouth. In an instant he looked almost like a dragonet again, eyes sparkling with wonder and a smile so bright Umber thought he would never need the sun again.

"I drew the pictures and thought of the story myself," Umber admitted. "Jet and Sora helped me write the dialogue."

Umber wasn't an artist. His dragons looked like wobbly lizards with bread loaves for wings. The faces were always crooked and he had coloured outside the lines a lot. This had no effect on Flame as he scanned the parchment with glee, his eyes darting back and forth at the pictures.

Finally he paused, his smile widening further. "Is this me?" he asked, turning the parchment around and pointing to a character with red scales, orange eyes and a scar over his muzzle.

"Maaaaaaaybe," Umber neither agreed nor disagreed. Flame playfully narrowed his eyes in suspicion before looking at the graphicoll again and letting out a snort.

"Wait, is that *Ibis*?" The villain he pointed to was a SandWing draped in a black cloak and drawn with very angry eyebrows that did indeed show a large resemblance to Flame's old rival. Umber only shrugged but let out a sly smirk.

"You'll just have to read the story and find out," he teased just as another wave of worry tossed over him. Umber shuffled his talons. "So...do you like it?"

Flame turned to Umber with a stunned expression as if shocked he would even ask such a question. "Of *course* I love it! Umber, this is incredible. No one's ever gotten me a gift like this – I don't even know – I'm just –" He set the graphicoll down and approached Umber.

The MudWing prepared himself for a hug or perhaps a heartfelt 'thank you' and was taken completely by surprise as Flame leaned forward to connect their mouths in a passionate kiss. Umber's whole body ignited as Flame reach up to stroke along Umber's jaw with his thumb, moving in synchronization with the rhythm of his mouth as they continued to kiss.

Hypnotized by the warmth and taste Umber let himself relax, closing his eyes and feeling each of Flame's soft scales message his lips. Utter bliss enveloped each sense leaving no room for doubts or worries. Just this single moment captured in taste and warmth. When Flame finally pulled away both were breathing hard, a little dazed, and flushed from cheek to chest.

"Thank you," Flame finally gasped out and it took a second for Umber to realize he was thanking him for the graphicoll.

"Yeah – I mean, anytime – no problem. I'm glad you liked it. I know

it's not as good as your other graphicolls and it might have some tea stains on it and I guess I shouldn't have mentioned the tea stains..."

"Shut up and kiss me," Flame demanded, putting a stop to Umber's disorientated rambling. The MudWing smiled and leaned in for another bout of affection just as the door slid open. Flame and Umber froze in place as Jet tumbled in carrying several enormous bags that nearly covered every part of her body. As she passed through the entrance her shoulder hit the frame and the dragoness, the bags, and all the contents within fell to the floor in one disastrous heap.

"Be careful!" Sora exclaimed too late. Jet only released a pathetic groan, remaining on the ground surrounded by what looked like...art supplies? Sora entered as well, carrying fewer bags and carefully stepping over Jet's tail. When she saw Umber her eyes lit but then quickly looked to the floor, a red blush spreading over her face.

At first Umber didn't understand her reaction, until he realized he and Flame were still embraced rather tightly. Quickly they jumped apart, but their eyes kept gravitating together and they would share a small smile.

"I, uh, didn't think you guys would be here," Sora spoke up while digging Jet out from under the heap of paint brushes and sculpting clay. "What happened to your date in town?"

Abruptly Jet shot her head up, fixing Flame with a fierce stare. "You better not have messed up that plan!" she growled.

"Hey, *I* didn't mess it up!" Flame returned. "If you want someone to yell at then go find Ochre."

Jet tilted her head. "Who?"

"Anyway," Umber butt in. "What's with all the art supplies? Are you guys doing a project?"

"Actually this is for the art center," Sora explained and helped Jet to her feet. "Apparently the Healing Center got more funding for

artistic stuff so Zephyr sent Jet out this morning to buy more supplies and I went with her!" The females smiled at each other affectionately. They certainly were spending a lot of time together...

"We were going to sort them here but...maybe we should do it another time." Sora glanced again between Flame and Umber, a knowing smirk painting her face. "Come on Jet, let's go to the garden."

The SkyWing female snorted. "What!? But we need to get this stuff sorted by-" Her complaint was cut of my Sora who gave her a nudge in the side, tilting her head towards Flame and Umber in an obvious signal. Jet paused for a moment, brow furrowed until her expression relaxed into realization. "Oooooh. Right. Yes, we should leave." She winked at Umber who returned it with an awkward smile.

The two females hurried out the door. Sora turned around to give Umber a thumbs-up. "We won't be back for a while so...have fun!"

Umber sent a silent *thank you* to his sister as she slid the door shut behind her, leaving the males alone again.

A nervous excitement coursed through Umber's stomach. He shuffled his talons bashfully. "So...what should we do now?"

"Hmmm." Flame tapped his chin in thought and turned his gaze back to the table where the tea and gift were still sitting. A smile formed on his face. He grabbed Umber's talon, dragged him to the table to snatch the graphicoll and then lead them towards the bed.

The SkyWing fluffed up the pillows, propping them up against the wall as back support before flopping on the mattress with graphicoll in talon. He patted the small space next to him, indicating for Umber to join him. Shyly the MudWing crawled in bed, nestling up beside the SkyWing. It was a tight fit to have them both in bed, forcing them to cuddle even closer.

Umber's stomach gave a nervous lurch, wondering what they were about to do. He sighed in relief as Flame opened the graphicoll, holding it in such a way so that both of them could see the pictures.

"Let's read the graphicoll you made me, I want to see if this dragon that looks like me gets to punch that dragon that looks like Ibis."

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For the remainder of the afternoon the boys cuddled in bed, drinking various teas (Flame enjoyed all of them) while Flame narrated the adventure within the scroll. A permanent grin was plastered on the SkyWing's face. His eyes sparkled with joy and gratitude and he read Umber's story, laughing at all of the corny jokes and actually letting out a triumphant cry when the Ibis look-a-like was defeated. Before they knew it the sun had set and soon enough they were distracted from their reading by a gentle knock on the door. Slowly it opened and Sora peeked her head in.

"Hello? Umber? Flame? Are you still in here?" her soft voice called.

"Are they smooching?" Umber heard the loud whisper of Jet from behind his sister.

Quickly Flame and Umber got out of bed, Flame's lingering warmth clung to his scales as he approached he door, sliding it all the way open.

"Sora! You're back already?"

His sister blinked in confusion and Jet snorted. "*Already*?" she repeated. "Umber it's been, like, five hours."

He blushed and turned back to look at Flame who was lighting more candles. "Oh. Huh, it didn't feel that long," he admitted meekly.

Sora covered her mouth to hide her giggles while sharing a knowing glance with Jet. This only made Umber's blush deepen.

"Well I'm sorry to say the fun time is over," Jet ordered, motioning to the art supplies still thrown all over the floor. "We need to get this stuff sorted before tomorrow or my mother will kill me...well maybe not *kill* me but she'll be annoyed which, I assure you, can be just as bad."
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"Then why didn't you take this stuff back to *your* house?" Flame finally spoke up. He picked up a packet of water colors, glanced at it, and then threw it back on the pile. "Don't you want to keep this stuff in a more official place or something?"

Jet huffed. "*You* try carrying sixty pounds of supplies around the mountain! Sora's place was closer. Besides, how were *we* supposed to know you two would be in here smooching up a storm?"

Flame choked out an awkward cough while Umber tried to hold back a smile. "Uh, well, shut up," Flame intelligently answered.

Umber felt a gentle nuzzle on his shoulder and he turned to see Sora's warm eyes. "Sorry to ruin your date. If you really wanted to be alone I'm sure I could convince Jet to take this stuff somewhere else," she offered, ignoring Jet's sharp glare. Umber hesitated. He did want to spend more time with Flame but he already felt kind of bad for making them leave in the first place.

"No no, it's fine! It's pretty late anyway...maybe I should take Flame back to his room."

An orange wing flopped over him as Flame come up behind him. "Yeah, I don't want to stick around with these weirdos." He tilted his head towards the two females.

Umber laughed and shoved Flame's wing off. "Hey, that's my sister you're talking about!"

Flame nodded in apology towards Sora. "Sorry, just *that* weirdo then." He pointed a talon at Jet. The female turned around from where she had been stacking the supplies into piles and hissed at Flame before returning to her sorting.

Sora and Umber laughed at their friends' antics. Maybe someday the two SkyWing's would grow to like each other.

Once Flame was sure he had everything, which was really just the gift Umber gave them, they made ready to leave. "I'll be back soon!" Umber promised to Sora as he sat outside the door. To his surprise Sora hummed skeptically.

"Mmhmm, OK. Just...you don't have to rush back if you don't want to. I'll be fine here with Jet." She patted his shoulder, seemingly hinting at something Umber couldn't quite grasp. Why would she tell him not to rush back? Was she expecting him to stay out?

His questions remained unspoken as Flame impatiently tugged at his wing to leave. Waving farewell to his sister Umber fell in beside the SkyWing as they made their way across the grounds.

As they passed through the empty halls Umber was reminded of the previous night where he and Flame had walked this same path, shyly brushing their wings together and sending brisk glances at each other.

Tonight they were bolder. Flame had his wing wrapped around Umber, pulling him close as they walked. It was a little awkward and Umber kept stepping on Flame's feet, but the boys only laughed every time it happened.

Wherever his scales met Flame's a wonderful warmth and joy bubbled through. It soaked deep into his bones and coursed through his blood. The feeling was spectacular. He never wanted it to end. He didn't want this *night* to end.

To think, Umber had been terrified of Flame when he first met him...but now...

Umber let out a shallow laugh. *But now I'm falling in love with him.*

"What's so funny?" Flame asked, his tender gaze meeting Umber's.

Umber shoved the SkyWing with his shoulder. "Oh nothing – I was just thinking about how handsome you are and that I'm glad we went on a date."

Flame's furious blushing and shy smile melted Umber into mush. Slowly they wound their tails together in silent affection.

When they reached Flame's room he unlocked the door and sat at the entrance looking anxious and shuffling his talons. "So, um, thanks for going on a date with me..." Flame murmured, his tail still entwined with Umber's.

"Anytime," the MudWing answered with a smile. *Alright, Flame is back safe and sound, time to head back now,* the MudWing thought, but his body refused to listen. Instead it remained planted before Flame's door as if tethered to the SkyWing's body. "I, uh, should go now," he finally said, hoping that maybe speaking it aloud would make him move.

"Wait ..." Flame reached out to grab Umber's talons, even though Umber still hadn't made any motion to leave yet. "Did you want to maybe...come inside?"

"Uh..." Umber's heart was pounding in his throat. *YES,* his everything screamed but a second later the more reasonable side of his brain reminded him it was getting late. "I need to get back...to Sora and...I have a lot of stuff I need to do before bed." Even as he spoke it the pathetic excuse tasted false and empty in his mouth. The crestfallen look that spread over Flame's face didn't help.

"Oh. OK." Flame released Umber's talons and the MudWing almost reached out to connect them again. "I understand if you want to get back to your sister, you haven't seen her all day," he continued.

"Yeah," Umber nodded. "Yeah. My sister...I should leave. I'll see you tomorrow-"

"C-can I give you a kiss? Before you leave?" Flame abruptly asked, leaning forward with anxious eyes. Umber's breath hitched in his throat and that moment of hesitation must have frightened Flame for the SkyWing backed off, rubbing his neck embarrassed. "Uh, we don't have to if you don't want. I was just hoping – I mean, I understand if you didn't want to-"

Umber didn't even think; he merely let his instincts take control as he grabbed Flame's face and pulled him into a kiss. Flame showed no hesitation. As soon as they connected he reacted immediately by wrapping Umber in his wings and pulling them together, deepening the kiss.

Sparks danced across Umber's vision and along his scales, igniting an insatiable heat throughout his body. He wanted – no – *needed* more. When the males finally pulled themselves apart they were

panting.

From the hungry look in Flame's eyes Umber knew the SkyWing was feeling the same way. Flame swallowed hard before speaking, his voice a husky whisper. "Are you sure you don't want to come in?" His breathing was coming out in shallow gasps. "I know we promised not to get into anything serious but...maybe just for tonight we could make an exception?" He leaned in to nuzzle Umber's nose tenderly.

The only thing Umber could think of was the warmth of Flame's scales and the way the SkyWing's voice made him shiver. Smiling gently Umber nodded before following Flame inside, the door sliding firmly shut behind them.

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Author's Note:

Looks like Umber is going to get that reward ;3 And don't worry, everything Flame and Umber are about to do does not require a mature rating :P (Just smooching)
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Chapter 25.5

Flame lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. From outside his window the chirping of crickets in the long grass and frogs from the river bank roamed in, mixing with the soft snores of Umber. The MudWing was nestled beside him, head partly buried beneath his wing in a deep and peaceful slumber. The rise and fall of his chest and the occasional twitch of his talon were his only movements.

Despite the cool breeze meandering in the air felt heavy to Flame, weighing his chest down and making his breathes laboured. He couldn't stop thinking about his mother.

Needing a break from his anxious thoughts Flame turned away from the ceiling and rested his gaze on Umber, studying the angles of the MudWing's face as if it were a map to the stars. He just didn't understand how a dragon could be so *perfect*; or how such a dragon could ever like him back.

A deep calm overcame Flame and he let his eyes shut for a moment before snapping them open again. He tore his gaze away from Umber and shook his head, trying to rid himself of the desire to just curl up around the brown dragon and fall sleep.

Was he tired? Hell yes.

Did he just want to surrender to the warmth next to him and sleep? Absolutely.

Was he going to do any of that? No.

Ever since he had seen Ochre in town he hadn't been able to stop the nagging poison in the back of his mind, the black whispers that coiled around his brain, burrowing deep and refusing to come out.

Why hasn't she contacted me? Did she just send me here to forget about me? Does she even care anymore? What could be so important that she

would just forget about her own dragonet?

Fury and pain pulsed through him as he recalled what Umber had said to him while they had been in the Capital: *I'm sorry, Flame. I wish I could tell you what you want to know, but only your mother can answer those questions.*

And at that moment, while he had sat in the market with tears in his eyes and a shattered heart, Flame had come to a decision right then and there: He was done waiting. If she wasn't going to come to him, he would go to her. And he was *going* to get his answers.

But he had to wait until night to leave. If anyone saw him going, especially Umber or Starf, they would have tried to stop him. In hindsight it had probably been a bad idea to invite Umber to stay over the same night he was planning to run away...but he didn't have any regrets.

Flame tensed as Umber released a snort in his sleep and shuffled closer to the SkyWing. After a few moments his breathing slowed again and the snores returned. Flame let himself relax.

He had to leave soon before Umber woke up. He blinked the exhaustion out of his eyes and gathered himself before slowly lifting the blanket off his body and sliding out of bed. His talon tip touched the floor as he finagled his way out of the tangle of bedding only to be yanked back at the last second. He jerked his head up to see what was holding him back and realized that Umber was lying on his wing.

Holding in an exasperated sigh he slooooooooowly pulled his wing from beneath the heavy dragon, shuffling it around while keeping a close eye on Umber for any signs of waking. Finally he pulled it free and froze as Umber began to stir. Flame held his breath while Umber flopped onto his other side and promptly fell back to sleep.

Flame exhaled his breath. He was lucky Umber was such a deep sleeper.

He approached the bed and pulled the blankets over Umber's body, tucking him in and giving him a small kiss on the nose.

I'm sorry, Umber, he thought. *I hope you won't be too worried about me. I'll be back soon.*

A moment of hesitation passed through the SkyWing as he looked down at the sleeping dragon. What was he *doing*? He was already in trouble for pretty much *everything*. What would Zephyr say when she found out he had actually left? What would Starf say? Would they kick him out? Or worse...make Ibis watch him again?

Flame clenched his talons and shut his eyes, steeling himself. No, he had to do this. He needed to find out once and for all what his mother thought of him.

Stumbling around in the dark he found his desk and pulled out a two blank pieces of parchment and an ink bottle. He couldn't risk lighting a candle so he took his supplies to the window so he could write in the moonlight.

He decided that he wouldn't be a *complete* shit-head and just disappear. He would at least leave a note. He dipped his talon and wrote down a basic letter.

Umber,

Sorry I left on such short notice. I'm going to visit my mother. Be back in a few days
- Flame

It wasn't all that romantic but it's not like he had a whole day to write this. He folded it up and put Umber's name on the front...and that's when he remembered Umber couldn't read.

Crap! He slapped his talon to his forehead. After several minutes of considering just waking the MudWing up and telling him Flame finally decided it would be best to let the MudWing sleep. *Well I guess I'll just have to hope he takes it to Sora...although I would rather as few dragons as possible know where I'm going.*

The only other dragon he wanted to tell was Starf. Flame was actually surprised how much he had come to care about the SeaWing; he didn't want Starf worrying about him or getting in

trouble because of Flame. He took out the other parchment and quickly wrote the same note he had written to Umber with the intention of slipping it beneath Starf's door.

Hopefully his Healer would understand. If anyone knew how much he missed his mother it would be Starf.

Taking a deep breath Flame placed Umber's note on the nightstand by his bed but paused. As a last minute addition he scribbled sappy little hearts all over the letter. *Now* it was more romantic.

With everything in place he quietly slid open the door and slipped out. His next stop was Starf's office to drop of the letter, and then...he would see his mother.

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Author's Note:

A mini chapter!! So the update schedule might be a little wonky until January since I am home for the holidays hanging out with family. I hope everyone is having a wonderful and peaceful holiday season <3
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Chapter 26

Starfish woke up that morning feeling that something was...off. He rose and made his bed, gathered his satchel of files and locked his door as he left, all why contemplating this strange churning in his stomach and tingling in his gills.

It was a feeling he had come to associated with impending doom...or a rain storm.

Either way, he still had a job to do. No apocalypses, calamities, or light showers were going to stand in his way.

Starfish doubled checked that his door was locked before making his way down the East-wing of Queen Ruby's palace. Since the Healing Center was reserved for patients, the SkyWing Queen had graciously offered her castle to house the Soul Healers who worked there. She had converted many of the old servants' chambers into smaller rooms. They weren't lavish in any sense, Queen Ruby was apparently much more frugal that her mother, but they served their purpose.

The sun filtered in through the vast windows that perforated the arching walls. It warmed the stone floor beneath Starfish's talons as he continued down the corridor towards the take-off balcony. As soon as he stepped into the light the SeaWing spread his wings to absorb more of that wonderful heat and took a deep breath of the fresh mountain air.

It wasn't the ocean but it was still a beautiful place to live.

He gave his wings a few pumps to warm them up further before taking to the sky, riding along the swift currents of air that tumbled down the mountain's face to the valley below where the Healing Center lay safely nestled.

His first stop was the cafeteria, where he snagged some coffee and a

bagel to take up to his office. Precariously holding the coffee with his right wing-thumb, the bagel in his mouth, and his bag of files under his left wing he unlocked his office door and stumbled through.

As much as he would like to sit down and enjoy his breakfast he needed to prepare for his session with Flame in twenty minutes. The SeaWing took a big gulp of coffee and pulled out the hefty load that was Flame's documents.

Even though Starfish had only really been a Soul Healer for a little over half a year, he knew Flame would always been one of his toughest patients. Not because he was difficult to work with, Starfish truly liked Flame and wasn't bothered at all by his rough mannerisms and tumultuous temperament. No, what made Flame difficult was the depth of complexity of the emotional damage.

There was no single moment to pinpoint his trauma, nothing concrete to hone in on or focus their energies. Instead it was spread out over his life like the stinging tentacles of a jellyfish, warping his personality and psyche into what he is today. It would take a lot of work and patience to untangle Flame from his past, but Starfish was willing to do whatever it took to help the young dragon.

Flame deserved to live a happy life.

However, before Flame could properly heal he needed to confront the *source* of this web of trauma: his mother. It hadn't taken Starfish long to figure out how strained their mother/son relationship was and he had written several pages of notes dedicated to the topic. Shuffling through the parchments he took out the first scroll and briefly read the paragraphs.

Session 8

Flame's relationship with his mother is chaotic and unstable. During our sessions Flame has spoken many times of how furious he is with Avalanche for leaving him behind and pushing him away. These rants are often followed by acute episodes of anxiety, guilt and (even though Flame tries to hide them) tears. However, when I try to follow up Flame quickly becomes defensive of his mother.

It is obvious he loves her very much, but she has hurt and neglected him to the point where he no longer feels he can rely on her as a source of love and support. I believe this strain in their relationship is the source of his overly aggressive behaviour and his eagerness to assume that everyone is thinking the worst of him. I also believe there is some connection with his strained relationship with his mother and his attempted murder of Stonemover, but I will have to wait before I make any theories. He is reluctant to talk about the NightWing and seems to display immense regret for his actions.

Session 9

For the first time since we're been meeting Flame has mentioned his scar. He seems to be under the impression that his mother is disgusted with him and that is why she keeps sending him away. From what I have learned of Flame so far it appears he is using his scar as a coping mechanism for the neglect his mother gave him. He is blaming it for their severed relationship, despite the neglect having occurred long before he got the scar. I am trying to teach him to accept his scar and to not see it as a deformity, but I sense that this will not work until he has overcome his traumatic relationship with his mother.

If this is the case than I suspect I will have to arrange a meeting with Avalanche and her son.

Session 10

This session has been a complete failure and is entirely my fault. I tried to push Flame to speak of Stonemover, but it only resulted in agitating him to the point where he fled my office in a rage.

When Flame first came to the Healing Center his previous teachers gave me some background on what had happened with Stonemover. Apparently the animus' refusal to heal Flame's scar was the "motif" for the attack, or at least that was how his previous teachers described it. However, I think there is more to it than that, but I still need more information...when Flame is ready to share it.

Starfish sighed, rubbing his temples in a circular motion. As much as he wanted to help Flame he knew the only dragon that could make any different was Avalanche. It wouldn't be easy and it would

certainly take many years to mend their relationship but Starfish believed it was the only way to bring Flame peace.

Abruptly Starfish's stomach gave another warning lurch and he decided to drown it out with more coffee but as he reached for his mug he knock over the stack of files on his desk. He quickly dropped to the floor and gathered up his papers when he noticed one that didn't belong. It was closer to his door and seemed to have been ripped off from a larger piece...it also had his name scribbled on it in Flame's writing.

Ignoring the aggressive twisting of his stomach Starfish opened the letter and read the small note, his eyes widening with dread as he did so.

"Oh carp," Starfish swore. He dropped the letter and rushed out the door. *This is bad this is bad this is bad THIS IS NOT GOOD!*

He had no idea when Flame had wrote this letter, maybe he was long gone already, but, on the slim chance he hadn't left yet, Starfish ran to the SkyWing's room to see if he was still there. *Flame is not ready to see his mother yet. His emotions are still unstable and we've only just started working on temper management!*

Meandering dragons jumped out of Starfish's way as he sprinted towards the west-most building. His lungs were heaving by the time he reached Flame's room and without pausing to catch his breath he began to pound at the door.

"Flame?! Are you in there?"

The SeaWing's heart melted with relief as he heard a loud *thump* come from behind the door, as if someone had just fallen out of bed. The sounds of talons scarping along the floor followed as the dragon within scrambled to get to the door.

Finally the door slid open and Starfish was greeted by a disheveled and dewy eyed...*Umber*?

Starfish's jaw fell open but he quickly slammed it shut. "Umber? What are you doing here? Where's Flame?"

Umber tilted his head in confusion, revealing the line of love-bites running along his jaw and neck.

Starfish pursued his lips. *Oh. So* that's *why he is here.*

It had been pretty obvious that the two males had been developing feelings for each other but he was a little surprised at how fast it had escalated. He had advised Flame to avoid serious relationships not to be mean, but because he didn't want the SkyWing's already fragile heart to be damaged more. Flame was more sensitive than he let on.

But, as much as he wanted to protect Flame, he wasn't going to force the young dragon to do as he said. If this was what he wanted then Starfish would support him no matter what.

"Flame?" The MudWing rubbed his eyes, his face a mirror of the SeaWing's confusion. "Shouldn't he be with you?" He slid the door open fully, revealing a paper note stuck to his chest by static. In Flame's writing Umber's name had been written on the front. It also had a flurry of uneven little hearts scribbled all over it.

Starfish plucked it off and passed it to the MudWing. "It looks like Flame left you a note as well."

With even more confusion Umber took the note, squinting hard at the name on the front. "This says my name...right?" he asked. Starfish nodded and waited for him to read the message within, but instead he passed it to the SeaWing. "Would you read this for me? I'm...not that skilled yet." He hunched his shoulders, embarrassed.

"Of course." Starfish took the message and released a mournful sigh when he read it. "It's just as I feared. It says the same thing as my note."

"But what does it say?"

"Well...Flame has run away to see his mother," he answered, folding the note up to pass back to Umber. But the MudWing was too shocked to receive it. The cloud of sleep that had fogged his eyes lifted and in its place the sharp, wide-eyed expression of fear came

through.

"WHAT!" Umber bellowed. He threw his wings over his head in despair. "Oh no no no this is all my fault!"

Starfish raised his talons to calm the young male. "Umber, please, it's not your fault."

"But it IS!" He took a few deep breaths. "Yesterday we went to the market – we saw Ochre, I didn't know who he was but Flame knew him – and and and there were members of the Talons of Peace there – Flame was so excited to see his mother, he thought she would be there too but she wasn't and I should have KNOWN something was wrong he was so upset and then suddenly it was like he was fine but he was *pretending* to be fine and I didn't do anything about it and I didn't tell him that his mother might have a boyfriend and he's going to show up there and see it for himself and be so upset!" Umber sobbed, spinning around in frantic circles.

The Healer had to grab the MudWing by the arms to stop his crazed pacing. "Calm down. There is no need to panic," he ordered with as much authority as he could muster. Starfish had never really been the military type, that's why he had opted for the doctor route, like his mother. However, he knew that if he didn't get a hold of the situation nothing would get done. "Now, what's all this about Avalanche having a *boyfriend*? What makes you think that?"

"Ochre told me," Umber answered. The name was familiar to Starfish, Flame had spoken often of his hatred for NightWings due to what they had done to him. Taken him from his mother and placed him with a band of dragons unofficially deemed the 'False-Dragonets'. From what he had understood there had been five dragonets in total that made up the group...Flame didn't speak fondly of any of them.

"He said that was why Avalanche hasn't been contacting Flame but I didn't necessarily believe him so I kept my mouth shut." The MudWing ducked his head in shame. "I thought it would only make Flame upset but what if it's true and Flame finds out..."

"Yes, that would not be good," Starfish concurred, rubbing his gills.

Flame was already struggling for his mother's attention. His protective and jealous nature made Starfish skeptical that the SkyWing would calmly accept another male in his mother's life.

I must get to him as soon as possible, if he wants to confront his mother then fine but I should be there to mediate it.

"I think Avalanche is still in Possibility," Starfish thought aloud. "So that is likely where he went. If I leave now I should be there in a few hours...hopefully Flame will be alright."

Umber nodded vigorously in agreement. "Yes, and I'll go too!" The MudWing stepped into the outer hallway, closing the door behind him and looking to Starfish expectantly. "So are we leaving now then?"

"Uh..." Starfish had to take a moment to collect his thoughts. "Listen, I know Flame is important to you but perhaps I should go alone." *He* was Flame's Healer, and right now Flame was experiencing a crisis. He wanted to keep it as professional as possible...and he didn't want to put this young MudWing in the middle of a family drama. "I think it would be best if you stayed here."

Umber huffed in protest, lifting his broad head to hold Starfish's gaze. "What? But Flame needs me *now*! What's the point of me staying here?" the MudWing's voice rose into an angry shout and he flared his wings open aggressively. An instant later he folded them again, clamping his talons over his mouth, his eyes remorseful. "S-sorry, I didn't mean to yell. I just...I feel so bad about all this..."

Starfish rested a talon on Umber's shoulder, ducking his head slightly to level his blue eyes with the younger dragon's deep brown. "It's alright, Umber. I understand your concern, but what you must realize is that it's not just Flame that needs to be reasoned with. His mother will also be there and, from what I've heard, she can be just as cantankerous as her son. So I hope you understand why I think it's best if I go alone."

Umber lowered his somber gaze and slowly nodded.

Starfish gave the young dragon's shoulder a comforting squeeze before retracting his talons. "Good." He took several steps back to give himself room to take off. "I'll hopefully be back by the end of the day," he told the hunched over MudWing, a thick frown weighting on his wide mouth. "If I'm not back by dinner then tell Zephyr-"

"Tell her *what*?" A new voice joined the conversation. The muscles along Starfish's shoulders tensed but he forced himself to relax as he turned around to see Ibis marching straight towards him.

Hobbling behind her on three legs was a sunken eyed SandWing named Ravage, another of Starfish's patients. He was less of a dragon and more of a walking skeleton with a sheet of scales delicately draped over; the bones of his shoulders jutted out forming bold angles along the flesh and bulging nodules ran along his back as his scaled skin tightly clung to his vertebrae.

"This young dragon came looking for you at your office but you weren't there," Ibis accused. She turned her narrowed eyes towards Umber and then towards Flame's door. "Ugh, don't tell me that *brat* ditched another session."

Umber growled next to him and Starfish had to swallow the rumbling in his own throat.

"Ibis," Starfish tried not to hiss out her name. He clasped his talons together, trying to maintain his professional composure. "What happens between me and my patients is none of your business and should you ever insult my patients again I will take my complaints directly to Zephyr. Got it?"

Ignoring Ibis' hiss Starfish finally turned his attention to his patient. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Ravage. Is there something wrong? Are you experiencing more withdrawal symptoms? Is your leg bothering you again?" Ravage had served under Blister in the war, but after an IceWing hit him with their frostbreath he was forced to have his back left leg amputated. Afterwards he had developed an addiction to the pain medication. During their sessions it was Starfish's goal to help him regain weight and break his dependence on the drugs.

As Ravage stepped closer Starfish had to repress a shudder as the sight of the mutilated limb. It wasn't that he was disgusted; he had seen many injuries during war and even just in his normal practice. But for some reason Starfish had never really become *hardened* like most doctors. Every time he saw a nasty wound he couldn't help but imagine how painful it must be. His mother used to tell him he was too empathetic to be a doctor, that you had to distance yourself from the issue otherwise risk your emotions affecting your performance.

But Starfish had never really agreed with that. He believed his empathy was what made him a great Healer.

With a groan Ravage sat down, leaning heavily to the right to avoid putting pressure on his damaged leg. "Nah, it's nothing as dramatic as that. I was just wondering if I could have my session earlier today, maybe before lunch?" the SandWing rasped.

Starfish nodded and smiled, although mentally he was recalculating his whole day and whether he would still have time to go get Flame. "Of course we can have it earlier. Would you like to make this change permanent?"

Ravage shook his head gently. "No thanks, I like my evening sessions. It's just that tonight I have a date," he winked. Starfish balked in surprise.

Seriously! Starfish asked the universe. *Why do all my patients have DATES and I don't?*

Deciding now was not the time to wallow in self-pity Starfish simply nodded again. "Well it should be no problem then, I'll see you shortly."

"Thanks, Starfish! I owe you one." Ravage weakly clapped Starfish on the back before limping away. Starfish watched him go, all while thinking about what he was going to do.

I can't chase after Flame now! I even have time to get to Possibility and back before the next session. I could go afterwards but...

"So where *is* Flame then?" Ibis questioned, sticking her snout in Starfish's face. The waves of heat wafting off her body making his scales dry up.

The Healer took a step back. "He's...well, uh..."

Ibis took a step forward. "Well what?"

If it had been anyone but Ibis Starfish would *probably* have told them the truth, that Flame had runaway to see his mother. But it just *had* to be Ibis. Starfish had fought tooth and claw to keep Ibis from getting Flame kicked out of the Healing Center. The SandWing was convinced that Flame was a danger to others, a belief that was probably strengthened by her own dislike for the SkyWing. She had been pretty close to convincing Queen Ruby but luckily Zephyr and Starfish had had a stronger argument.

However, if she knew Flame had actually run off she would take this straight to Queen Ruby as proof he was too unstable to be here. He had to think of a lie.

"Well he is..."

"Sick!" Umber offered, pushing himself between the Sea and SandWing. "Very sick. In fact, we should probably let him rest. He's...uh...very contagious!"

Ibis back away, her golden snout curling in disgust. "Oh gross. Just make sure he doesn't come anywhere near me."

"Yes, of course," Starfish quickly picked up the ruse. "He's spending the rest of the day in bed so we should let him be." He shooed Ibis away with his wings.

She gave one more suspicious look at Flame's door before finally knocking Starfish's wings aside. "Alright, I'm going! But just so you know this whole situation is shady. If I don't see Flame by tomorrow I'll know something is up."

She whipped around so fast her barbed tail nearly clocked Starfish across the face. His reflexive head-jerk back put him out of range at the last possible second. Without turning around to apologize Ibis

continued on until she was out of the building.

Umber and Starfish exhaled deeply.

"It looks like there is a change of plans," the SeaWing said turning to the MudWing. "I won't be able to get to Flame as soon as I hoped." He rubbed his face and groaned. "Flame is probably already there, I can't just *leave* him!"

Umber cleared his throat, causing Starfish to look up. The brown dragon was smiling hopefully. "Maybe *I* could go?"

Starfish groaned again. "No, Umber. This is not your job. Flame's well-being is my responsibility. I'll just have to leave a little later than anticipated." Starfish shielded his eyes with his wing and looked to the sky to estimate the sun's position. He would have to meet with Ravage soon.

"I'll leave sometime before lunch, hopefully Flame is alright and I'm just assuming the worst. As for you, Umber, go and enjoy the day with your sister and try not to worry about Flame." Starfish waited for a response but only silence answered. He brought his wing down and looked to where the MudWing had been sitting only to see the young dragon was gone.

"Umber?" He called out, spinning around in a circle. "Umber!"

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Umber felt bad for running off, but he knew he was never going to get Starfish's blessing to go after Flame, so, when the SeaWing was busy looking at the sky he had made a dash for the exit, ducking behind the couches and tables that filled the center of the building.

He was pretty sure he knew how to get to Possibility. He recalled Clay raving about it when it was first created. He knew it was somewhere near the Great Five-Tail River and *that* was easy to get to so how hard could it be to find?

Umber looked back to see Starfish spinning in circles, casting confused glances around and mouthing out his name. A tinge of guilt filled his chest but he pushed it down. Flame needed him.
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Finally he reached the exit and bound towards the garden where he took flight immediately, causing dirt to go flying from a nearby flower bed. Wobbling in the strong breeze he climbed higher until the Healing Center was the size of a stone stuck between the giant crevices of the mountain. Soaring through the mountain range he dipped and dived over the valleys until the hills became meadows and the cliffs became grasslands.

At the edge of the horizon he could see black lines like veins snaking their way across the flat landscape, tendrils splitting off from the main artery and curling like tails into five distinct swirls. The Great Five-Tail River was in sight. With renewed vigor Umber sped up.

Don't worry, Flame. I'll be there soon.

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Author's Note:

It was fun writing from Starf's POV for once! Poor guy certainly has his talons full with Flame ;3
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Chapter 27

Flame had almost forgotten how much he hated Possibility. *Almost.*

He landed down near the bridge that connected the two halves of the town across the Great Five-Tail River, but as soon as his talons touched the dry soil he could feel everyone's gaze flicker towards him and lingered on his scarred face before quickly looking away.

"Assholes," he murmured under his breath. Keeping his head down he shouldered his way through the crowd, eyes locked on the ground before to avoid meeting anyone's gaze.

It was strange how different it felt to be here again after living at the Healing Center. Here everyone was so *fake*. They greeted you with a smile but as soon as you turned away they had a disgusted sneer on their face. It was like they thought of ugliness or imperfections as some sort of disease; if you get too close you'll get it as well! Or worse they act TOO kind towards you and you just know it's out of pity and that they feel obligated to do so.

But at the Healing Center pretty much everyone was messed up in some way. After a while it was just common to see someone without a limb or someone mumbling to themselves while obsessively polishing a spoon.

Following the flow of the crowd Flame finally approached the town center which was really just a worn down gazebo where announcements were made and sometimes local bands played. Pushing his way off the main road he stumbled into a quiet side street that lead to his old home. The dens here were wooden and above ground but high enough to stop the sharp angle of the morning sun. As a result the whole alley was dim with shadow and a coolness hung in the air that made Flame shiver.

He walked a little ways down before making another right turn onto his street. The fifth house down was his. The squat building

was nestled tightly between its neighbours. Small potted flowers sat to either side of the door, their blush coloured petals drooping slightly from dehydration. The window shutters were closed tightly and there was a foreboding air clinging to the bland walls.

Up until this point Flame's resolve had pushed him forward, but now it was depleting rapidly as the weight of the moment finally hit him. He was going to confront his mother. No backing down this time.

His legs were shaking so hard he nearly collapsed once he reached the front door.

Growling he pulled himself up and lifted his chin. *Stop being such a coward! What's the worst that can happen?*

During his whole flight here he had obsessed over how this conversation with his mother would play out. He was trying to take an optimistic approach to the whole thing but he was quickly becoming overwhelmed with fear. So many things could go wrong. What if he lost his temper again? What if *she* lost her temper? Would she be angry that he left the Healing Center and drag him right back? What if she didn't answer his questions? Or worse...what if her answers were everything he feared.

Flame swallowed the cold lump in his throat. It slithered down his neck and landed in his chest in a tight knot around his heart. *Ugh, why am I so terrified? She's my mother. She loves me. She has to, right?*

As much as he tried to reason with himself, he couldn't stop of the onslaught emotions that slipped into his consciousness, bringing forth all the questions he feared the most.

If she loves you so much then why didn't she write to you? Why does she keep sending you away?

Shut up! he screamed to himself but to no avail.

Is it because she can't bear to look at you anymore? Who could ever love a deformed dragonet?

SHUT UP!

Or maybe it's because she never loved you to begin with.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" he screamed, burying his head beneath his wings. His voice echoed up and down the empty street, bouncing back to him in a mocking tone. He felt the sting of tears well up at the edges of his eyes and he quickly blinked them away. Taking a few deep breathes he then straightened his back and lifted his talons to the door. *No turning back. Just do it.*

He pounded his knuckles against the wood and took a step back, waiting for the door to open.

But after several seconds of waiting nothing happened. Impatience outweighing fear he knocked on the door again, this time more aggressively. Again, nothing happened. Flame pulled at the locked door in frustration.

Seriously?! She's not even here?! Now I'm just going to look like a creeper standing out here waiting for her to come home...unless...

He remembered his mother used to keep and extra key beneath one of the flower pots. He went to the one of the left and tilted it, ignoring how the dry soil spilled over the side, and found the copper item beneath. Releasing a triumphant cry he grabbed the key and unlocked the door, quickly pushing it open and closing it behind him.

To call his place a 'house' would be a vast over-exaggeration. Inside was only a single, giant room that tripled as a bedroom, living room, and office. As Flame glanced around the empty space he immediately noticed something was different.

First of all his nest was gone.

Where the hell is my bed?

The left side of the room had always been *his* side. His green storage trunk was still there, pushed up against the wall just where he had left it, but the spot where his nest had been was completely empty except for a few blankets that were definitely not his. They were too thin and silky for his liking. In fact they reminded Flame of the stuff

used to make egg-nests out of since the fabric had to be breathable for the egg.

Weird, he thought. *Everything else is the same.*

His mother's writing desk was in the same spot: right next to the window at the back of the room. So was her nest of disorganized blankets strewn about the floor.

Feeling that something was wrong Flame ran his talons along the top of his trunk. He wanted to see if everything was as he had left it. The trunk was mostly used it to store all his extensive collection of graphicolls. He had only been able to bring half his collection with him to the Healing Center, being forced to leave the rest at home. He just wanted to check if they were still there...

Slowly he lifted the heavy lid and his heart plummeted like a wingless bird. "Oh *hell* no."

They were gone. His pristine collection of graphicolls was gone. In their place was a bunch of garbage toys that were *way* below his age range. Panic began to set in.

"Where are they?" he gasped, digging through the bin of junk, tossing things left and right to see if maybe the graphicolls were somewhere at the bottom. Anger began to pulse through him.

"WHERE ARE THEY?" Once it was clear his graphicolls were not there he tossed the trunk to the side, smoking bellowing from his nostrils. Mixing with this inferno of rage the cold drip of heartbreaking confusion set in as well.

I...don't understand. Why would she get rid of them? She knows how important they are to me and...what's with all this shit?

He picked up one of the toys he had flung to the side and turned it around in his talons. It was a wooden dragon, mostly used to hatchlings to chew on as their teeth grew.

Flame gasped and dropped the toy as he heard voices from outside the door.

"Huh, that's strange. The door was unlocked when I tried to open it..."

Flame swallowed hard at the sound of his mother's voice. A part of him wanted to run and hide like a dragonet fleeing a scolding. But he willed himself to stand tall. He had come here to demand from his mother an explanation for all the years of neglect, and while he was determined to get his answers his focus had been thrown off. Betrayal, confusion and anger all pumped through his heart as it drummed against his chest, causing him to go to the door and swing it open.

"Mother!" he growled.

In shock Avalanche jumped back snarling, her lashing tail shattering one of the flower pots, readying herself to attack the intruder. As soon as she saw it was Flame her body seemed to deflate and she looked upon her son as if he had risen from the grave.

"Flame?" she breathed, and for a moment a flicker of warmth danced across her eyes. A second later it was gone as her expression hardened and her eyes glinted with anger. "Flame!" she barked, raising her head to hover above his in authority. "What are you doing sneaking around the house? You should be at the Healing Center!"

Flame ignored her accusations; he had his own. "Where is all my stuff? My bed – my graphicolls – where did you put them?" He stood as tall as he could. She was still several heads taller than him but he did his best to hold her gaze.

Avalanche opened her mouth to retort but said nothing. She closed her mouth, the fierceness in her frame giving way to defeat. "We better go inside. I have a lot of things to tell you," she finally said, stepping past Flame. Keeping his eyes locked on his mother Flame closed the door before warily following her into the center of the room where she motioned for him to sit down.

He plopped down on the floor before his mother, folding his arms across his chest. "And while you're explaining things why don't you

go ahead and tell me why the hell I haven't heard anything from you in weeks?" he demanded, trying to keep his voice steady.

Avalanche winced. "Yeah...sorry about that. I've had a lot on my mind in the past few weeks."

Flame bit his cheek to help hold back the tears. *Really? That's it? Nothing but a 'Oh gee, whoops! Did I forget to send my only child a letter after two weeks? Haha oh well'. Does she really care that little about me?*

"I see," Flame rasped, his voice tight. "And what was so *fucking* important that you just forgot about me?"

"Mind your language, young man!" she scolded before taking a breath. "And my mind has been rather distracted lately because... well... " she paused, glancing at Flame warily, "I...I'm gravid now."

Flame jerked his head up, his eyes as round as the moons. "WHAT?"

Avalanche nodded before standing up, revealing her thickened midsection. "It'll be laid in a few weeks and I have been busy preparing." She sighed and tilted her head to look at him with gentle eyes. It was the pretend 'kind' look she always gave him when she was about to say some fake motherly bullshit.

"I'm sorry I didn't write, but that is no excuse for you to just go crazy and run away from the Healing Center." She fixed him with a stern look. "Now, I want you to go back this instant and behave yourself. I'll write to you once I get everything figured out, alright?" She stood up and began walking towards to door, no doubt to show Flame out.

Meanwhile Flame was seething.

What a bunch of bullshit. His talons felt like they were vibrating, but he had no idea if it was from fear or rage. *Does she think I don't realize what she's doing? That I won't call her out on her lies? Well she'd better think again.*

"See? You're doing it again!" he hissed. Flame thrust his body in front of his mother's to block her path to the door. "You're sending

me away, just like you always do. After I flew all the way here just to see if you WERE STILL ALIVE since how the hell was I supposed to know since you didn't even bother writing to me? And then you tell me you're gravid and try to push me out the door like it's no big deal? Fuck that! I'm not going anywhere until I get some answers!" Smoke was coming from his mouth and nose in thick, black billowing plumbs that collected at the ceiling.

For a moment Avalanche seemed at a loss for words, but soon her face scrunched into a scowl and smoke erupted from her nostrils, traveling in winding tendrils to the ceiling as where they joined with Flame's. A hazy fog filled the room as the smoke accumulated.

His mother shook her head angrily. "It's for your own good, Flame. The Healing Center is where you belong. Also, what goes on in my life is none of your business. If I am going to have a hatchling then that's *my* concern, not yours."

"*None of my business*?" Flame snarled. "Well maybe you should have thought about that before you threw away all my stuff. Now it *is* my business."

Avalanche roared in frustration, her tail swishing through the gathering smoke that filled the room. "Don't be so immature! You live somewhere else now and I need room for the egg. Where else was I going to put it?"

"That's not the point!" Flame insisted. He was done with is mother telling him his thoughts were immature or childish. "You threw away my graphicolls! You knew how important they were to me, just...why?" His thunderous voice was losing its edge as he asked the question with a desperate plea. "Do you even care about me anymore?" He paused, his voice cracking. "Did you *ever* care?"

Avalanche closer her eyes, her lips pursed together. "You wouldn't understand," she turned around and walked to the back wall to open the window that faced the street. Fresh light poured in along with the sound of meandering crowds. The cloud of smoke above their heads made a dash for the open sky and soon the air in the room was cleared. "Now is not a good time, Flame. I think you should head back to the Healing Center now."

Flame bit his lower lip to keep it from trembling. "See? There you go pushing me away again! Why can't you just-"

"ENOUGH!" Avalanche roared. Flame's mouth slammed shut and pulled his wings in tight as his mother rubbed her temples before releasing a sigh. "Sorry for yelling, I'm a lot more...hormonal than usual." She looked up. "I am in no condition to have this conversation right now. Please, just go back to Healing Center before you get into trouble."

Flame took a shuddery breath, grinding his jaw to hold back tears. Finally he lowered his gaze in defeat. "Fine," he rasped. This whole plan had been a disaster. His mother didn't want to listen to him and wanted him gone. It was over. "I'll show myself out, thanks," he growled. His tail dragged on the floor as he headed towards the door. He rested his talon on the handle and went to push it open just as another question came to mind. He swiveled his neck around to face his mother. "Wait...who's the father?"

Avalanche squirmed slightly before sitting down again and wrapping her wings around her body. She closed her eyes for a moment before answering. "I suppose you have a right to know."

Flame nearly scoffed. *Oh, so NOW I have a right to know.*

"His name is Shrimp," she continued. "He's been a good friend of mine in the Talons of Peace for a while now so...we decided to...

"To have a kid," Flame offered with a hiss.

"No," Avalanche asserted. "We decided to *further* our relationship." She inched closer to Flame and took a deep breath. "Flame, please give him a chance. I think once you meet him you'll like him."

Flame recoiled, a look of disgust on his face. "You expect me to just accept this guy as my dad now? I've never even met my *real* dad and you want me to just...*forget* about him?" Not that he remembered much about his father anyway.

"No, Flame. That's not what I'm asking-"

"Good, because it's never gonna happen!"

He had come here today thinking this was going to be a touching conversation were he and his mother would talk things over and he would find out it was all just a big misunderstanding and that she regretted sending him away.

But obviously life had decided it would rather knee him in the stomach than see him happy with his mother. His stuff had been thrown out, his mother was gravid and who the hell did this Shrimp guy think he was?

Why was this happening? It was like his mother was trying to replace him...

Flame inhaled sharply as his heart crumpled to dust. That was *exactly* what she was doing.

The SkyWing recalled something he had told Umber a while ago: *Everybody hates ugly things. It's a fact of life. Ugly things get thrown away, destroyed, left behind, and replaced with pretty things. No one wants a deformed flower or chair...or dragonet.*

"Flame? Are you alright?" his mother asked, her face alarmed. She quickly reached forward and wiped away the falling tears. He pushed her talons away, his breathes coming out in choked sobs.

"This has been your plan the whole time, hasn't it?" He aggressively wiped away the fat globs of water falling from his eyes. His head was spinning wildly, causing his stomach to lurch in a warning that he might throw up if he didn't get his breathing under control soon.

"Flame, I don't know what you're talking about. Just calm down." His mother reached for him again but he stumbled backwards out of her grasp.

"No!" He snarled. He couldn't stop himself as the accusations fell from his mouth. All the fears he had held back were tumbling out like a waterfall of black sludge. "You didn't send me to the Healing Center to *help* me. You just wanted to get rid of me! Your gross, deformed dragonet that that everyone hates, that you can't even look at without feeling ashamed."

"That's not true! Flame, please..."

"So you decided to have a new hatchling. One that would be beautiful and perfect while your broken dragonet gets sent away so he'll never bother you again."

I knew it! She hates me. She has always hated me. My own mother can't stand me, he mentally wailed. The fact that he had been right provided him with no comfort. Instead it felt like his heart was being carved hallow and filled with rocks.

He could barely see anything through the thick layer of tears that coated his eyes, but he could just make out the blurry shape of his mother moving towards him with talons outstretched.

"Flame..." she pleaded, but he swatted her talons away. The heartbroken expression on his mother's face would burn into his memories forever, but right now he wanted her to hurt, to feel everything he was feeling right now.

"Don't touch me!" he snarled, backing up against the door. "Just stay away from me! I never want to see you again!"

Tears drip off his chin onto the floor. He felt sick to his stomach. "I-I *hate* you!" he spat.

He flung open the door and ran. He didn't know where he was going but he had to get out of there. He heard someone called his name but he didn't stop. He pushed his way through the crowds, tears still spilling down his face.

All the while he only had one thought in mind: *What have I done?*

Author's Note:

Flame swears when he's upset, so I think we can forgive his potty mouth this time </3

Chapter 28

Umber flew in circles above the town of Possibility. He scanned the crowds below, concentrating on finding that familiar ruby red hide. Every time he saw that familiar shade of red his heart would flutter in excitement before descending only to pull back at the last second as he realized it wasn't Flame but just some other SkyWing.

By the Moons there were a lot of SkyWings here.

After nearly tackling several dragons Umber released a sigh and alighted down on top of a nearby gazeebo. His talons gripped the loose shingles in apprehension. *This place is so big...bigger than I thought it would be,* he admitted. He had assumed Possibility was just some small town between the Sky and Sand Kingdom. He had pictured is like a quaint little village with maybe one small market place, where everybody tipped their hats to each other when passing and probably spent the days farming or quilting or doing something rustic.

But he was quickly learning that it was certainly NOT like he imagined. At all.

It was a huge, boisterous place with restaurants, shops, and even a souvenir shack. Not to mention there were SkyWings all over the dang place. How was he going to find Flame now?

As if on cue, a commotion in the streets made Umber turn towards the sound.

Like an aggressive hippo lunging into a fast flowing river, Flame came barreling into the crowd. Dragons awkwardly but swiftly tried to move out of his way as the scarred SkyWing frantically pushed through them.

At that point Umber already knew things had gone wrong.

"Flame!" he called and went to jump down from the gazebo but paused as another ruckus shook the crowd. He lifted his head to see a *second* SkyWing trying to breach the throng of pedestrians, although her larger size was making it difficult.

"Flame! Come back!" she yelled, stretching her long neck to see above the stream of dragons. Umber balked in realization. *That must be Avalanche, Flame's mother!*

They shared the same intense orange eyes and angular face. The resemblance was uncanny.

Remembering Flame Umber quickly turned his head back in the direction he had seen his friend running. His heart dropped to his stomach when he couldn't find the familiar dragon but a moment later he heaved a relieved sigh as he saw Flame. The scarred dragon was running towards the bridge that connected the town across the river.

Umber watched as Flame climbed onto the railing and jumped off with wings spread wide. He caught the high winds that were coming off the turbulent river, using them to climb higher into the sky. Just as he took off Avalanche finally broke through the crowd to the other side of the street.

She spun around in frantic circles, calling out to her son. She hadn't seen him take off. Finally she sat down and buried her face in her talons, her shoulders shaking as sobs wracked her frame. Dragons cast her confused glances but mostly just walked around her like a stream around a rock.

It broke Umber's heart to see her so distressed. Whatever had just happened between Flame and his mother, it hadn't been good. He was tempted to go down and comfort her, perhaps even bring her along to find Flame.

But he didn't have time. Flame was already a minute dot in the expanding sky, shrinking with every passing second. By the time he convinced Avalanche to listen to him Flame's trail would be lost.

He cast a sympathetic glance towards Avalanche before taking to

the sky in pursuit of his kinda-sorta-boyfriend.

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Umber had forgotten just how good SkyWings were at flying. No matter how hard he pumped his wings Flame still remained a speck against the vast blue sky, diving in and out of clouds like a fly buzzing through the mist.

The SkyWing was going north for some reason, following the main artery of the Great Five-Tail River up towards the ocean which birthed it. Umber had never been to this part of Pyrrhia before.

He had been following Flame at full speed for nearly an hour and the burning in his lungs, wings and heart were aggressively reminding him he couldn't keep this up forever. *At least I haven't lost him...yet. Oh Moons, I hope he lands soon. I feel like I'm going to plummet from the sky at any moment.*

After another several minutes Umber finally saw the mouth of the river approaching. It began with the slow widening of the waterway, thickening like a snake swallowing a meal until it flared open like a flower to greet the salt water.

The strong sea breeze rocked Umber's steady flight and the air quickly became warm and salty. At this point Umber was beginning to panic. Surely Flame wasn't going to keep going. Unless you were a SeaWing it was a death sentence to fly over open ocean without knowing where your next landing opportunity is. Otherwise you risk exhaustion, your wings will give out and you will plunge into the ocean only to drown.

Umber's tight chest relaxed when he saw Flame descend towards an approaching island.

It was a couple miles off the shore, shrouded in sea mist and flocks of screeching seagulls. A lush forest carpeted its rolling hills and as Umber got closer he could see stark cliffs of red stone and soil braving the violent impact of the tide.

It was a beautiful place, but why was Flame coming here?
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He saw Flame land down on the on the west side of the island on a white patch of beach. Even from this distance Flame's red scales sparkled in the sun before he disappeared inland and into the trees.

Several minutes later Umber landed on the same patch of beach as Flame had, although instead of gracefully alighting down it was more of a crash as he careened into the soft sand, his lungs burning and wings aching. He rolled onto his back and sucked in air with gorging gasps as he waited for his heart to either explode or return to its normal pattern. All the while the tide washed towards him and nipped at his tail before playfully retreating back to the sea.

It took him longer than he'd like to admit to recover from his marathon of flight; he certainly had been slacking in his training ever since the war ended. Despite his pain he let out a stocky chuckle.

If my sibs saw me like this I wouldn't hear the end of it!

Finally he heaved himself to his feet and shook off the sand. By the looks of it the island was uninhabited...at least by dragons. There were plenty of animal tracks criss-crossing though the beach but only one set of dragon prints.

Those must be Flames, Umber noted. The deep gauges in the sand were quickly disappearing as the wind drifted across the beach. With renewed haste Umber scrambled to follow the trail before it vanished. *I need to get to Flame. I don't know what happened between him and his mother, but I swear I will be there for him.* He swallowed a shaky sigh. *I just hope I'll be able to help him.*

He followed the prints as they climbed up the sand-dunes, through the spiky grass that cut Umber's feet and finally disappeared as the soft sand abruptly met the mossy carpet of the forest floor.

Umber took a deep breath of the earthy scent that lingered in the air, mixing with the salty hues of the ocean and the sharp pine of the trees. The sunlight brushed through the leaves in sparse splotches along the ground like giant talon prints made of light, coaxing him to follow as they went deeper into the dense forest.

The brown dragon heeded their called and slipped beneath the canopy of leaves. He had lost Flame's talon-prints, but among the many scents that teased his nose he could detect the SkyWing's characteristic aroma. It reminded Umber of burnt cinnamon...in a good way.

It's been a while since I tracked a dragon with my nose, Umber fretted. Now-a-days he mostly just used his smell while hunting and to identify teas. With a pang Umber realized all the hard-earned skills he had learned during the war were ebbing away...but maybe that was a good thing.

Focus, Umber! he scolded himself, pushing the thoughts away. *Get to Flame first and THEN you can have a moral crisis.*

With an iron will Umber tracked Flame through the forest, following the scarred dragon's smoky trail as it hopped from branch to branch. As he went deeper into the woods his skills began to seep back from where they had been dormant in his mind. Soon enough details that would have slipped his notice prior suddenly became painfully obvious.

Talon marks on the roots, snapped twigs still hanging onto their branch by a thread where someone's wings obviously snagged, and scratches along the bark of trees that could only have been made by scales scraping their surface. All tell-tale signs of a dragon.

With each clue Umber began to pick up speed, tumbling through the forest with his heart pounding in anticipation. *His scent is so strong. He has to be close...*

Umber skidded to a halt as he entered a clearing of ferns that huddled close to a wide stream. On the other side of the clearing the trees thinned before the land dropped away in a cliff, tufts of long grass clinging to the rim. Further out he could see the ocean dance and spin, the rolling breeze tousling the soft ferns.

All these details briefly passed through Umber's senses, but he paid them little attention. His mind was anchored on something else.

Partially obscured by the feathery branches of the ferns was a red

scaled dragon, his hunched back towards Umber.

Flame! Umber jolted.

The SkyWing's shoulders were trembling as he wept by the bank, his sniffling chokes mixing with the gurgling water as it rushed past.

Softly Umber stepped forward, not wanting to startle the SkyWing. "Flame?"

The red dragon whipped around, revealing blood-shot eyes and damp, glistening cheeks. At first disbelief painted the SkyWing's face before it was replaced with melting relief. "Umber..." Flame whimpered, weakly stretching out a talon towards the MudWing.

Umber's talons barely brushed the ground as he bound across the clearing and into Flame's waiting arms. The SkyWing used wings, arms and tail to hold Umber close and the brown dragon returned the gesture.

They stayed like that for a while, holding each other while Flame's sobs violently shook both their bodies. Umber felt a stream of tears hit his head as they dripped from Flame's chin in droves. Umber wished so desperately for something to say that would calm Flame down. For a magic word or sentence that would make everything better. That would stop the pain coursing through the SkyWing's body. But nothing came to mind. Instead he just held the red dragon, stroking his back until the SkyWing was gasping for air, his sobs turning to retches.

"Flame, you're going to make yourself sick!" Umber nudged them apart to give Flame some space. He continued to rub Flame's back in soothing circles. "Shh, it's alright. Just breathe. Slowly now. In and out. Just listen to my voice, alright? In and out." With one shaky breath at a time Flame got control of his breathing. He leaned against Umber as weakness overtook his body, his orange eyes dull and swollen.

"H-how did you find me?" Flame sniffled out, his face slick with tears. The SkyWing reached up to no doubt aggressively wipe the

moisture away. The small scratched under his eyes suggested he had been less then gentle in his previous attempts. Umber gently grabbed Flame's talon to stop him.

"I'll tell you later. Right now let's get you fixed up. Just a moment," Umber advised. Remembering the hanging-moss he had seen on a nearby tree he quickly swiped it from the branch and dipped the soft lichen in the fresh stream. He brought it back to Flame and began to dab the SkyWing's irritated eyes. Flame sighed in relief as the cool water soothed the abused flesh.

"Thanks," he murmured and took the moss from Umber and continued the action. Stay tears were still falling but for the most part the scarred dragon had settled down, although a heavy aura of anguish clung to the SkyWing's scales like tar. It manifested in the slouch of his shoulders and the emptiness of his eyes. The fiery spark that so often flickered in the SkyWing's gaze was gone. It was if he had been scooped hallow.

Umber repressed a shudder. *I've never seen him so upset before...what happened with his mother? Oh pleaaaase don't tell me Ochre was right about the boyfriend...or what if it's something worse? All those fears that Flame had been building up... that his mother didn't love him and hated him...oh Moons don't let it be that.*

Umber took a breath, bracing himself for the answer to his question. "Flame...what happened? I was in Possibility when I saw you running from your mother..."

"So you saw that, huh?" Flame asked regretfully and Umber nodded.

Flame moved the moss to his right eye while his bottom lip began to tremble. Umber could see the strain in the SkyWing's face as he held back more tears. "She's *replacing* me, Umber," he snarled. "I went there hoping to get answer but instead all I got was a: *Go away! I've got a brand new family now and deformed dragonets aren't fucking allowed!"* Flame's voice was raw and hoarse, shaking with fury and betrayal. "She didn't send me to the Healing Center to *help* me; she was just getting rid of me!" He crumbled the moss into a ball and threw it into the stream. It settled gently atop the rippling waves before sinking.

The MudWing stared in bafflement. "Wha – did she *say* that?"

Flame hunching his shoulders together tighter and wrapping his wings around his body as if braving a bitter wind. "She didn't need to. The fact that she threw out my bed and graphicolls got the point across just fine."

Umber's wings drooped in sympathy. "That's terrible," he comforted, inching closer. He forced his way past Flame's membranous barrier as he nestled next his broad chest. The scarred dragon refolded his wings closed and pulled Umber in tight.

"I knew this was going to happen!" Flame seethed. "Ever since I got this scar she's *hated* me. I'm a hideous freak...my own mother is disgusted by me." He took in a shaky breath. "No one wants me."

"I do," Umber softly chimed in. He hesitantly reached his snout up to land a tender kiss on Flame's cheek. It was salty and damp but Umber didn't care. "And for the record...I think you're absolutely *gorgeous*."

Flame's face became a contortion of opposites as his eyebrows were still drawn together as if in pain while at the same time a weak smile pulled on his lips. He bent down and nuzzled Umber on the forehead. "Thanks," he breathed. "You make everything better."

Umber's heart felt as if it had expanded to fill his entire body. Every inch of his was tingly and warm. After several moments of silent embrace Flame lifted his head.

"So how *did* you find me?" he asked.

Umber tucked his head under Flame's chin, letting the heat from the red dragon's body seep into his scales. With a sigh he explained how Starfish had spoken to him, saying that Flame had likely gone to Possibility. Since Starfish hadn't been able to go Umber had went instead and arrived just in time to see Flame take off.

At the end of the story Flame cracked a smile. "If I had known you were chasing me I would have stopped. You should have yelled out or something."

Umber scoffed. "I was huffing and puffing enough as it was, I didn't have any extra lung power to yell. I was just thankful you landed here at...this place..."

"It's called Prince Egret Island, named after some SkyWing prince," Flame informed. The two pulled away from each other but their tails remained entwined. Flame stared out over the stream, through the trees and towards the ocean, his gaze deepening with familiarity as if looking at an old friend.

Going off of a hunch Umber quietly spoke. "Have you...been here before?"

Flame was silent for a moment. "This is where I was hatched."

Umber balked, his eyes widening. "Really?" He had assumed Flame had been hatched in some Talons of Peace camp.

Flame slowly nodded. "My mother kept my egg here to keep it safe. Once I hatched she took me to the Talons of Peace and left me with them." His voice became bitter as he spoke the last sentence. The well-traveled lines of tears on his face surged again as he blinked away the growing dampness in his eyes. "That was the first and last of my hatching-days she ever showed up to. All the other years she was away in the Sky Kingdom."

Flame made no reaction to remove the tears so Umber quickly reached up and brushed it away. He let his talon linger of Flame's face, cupping his cheek and pulling their foreheads together. "I know how heartbroken you are about all this. I know it's not fair and I know it hurts. Just..." he paused, not knowing what to say. What would Starfish say? Or Zephyr? What would ANYONE more qualified than him say?

"You *don't* have to face this alone, Flame," he finally muttered. His voice was unsure but he continued anyway. "I could have – or Starfish would have –"

"No. I had to do this on my own," Flame responded and lifted his head up to fix his eyes on Umber. "I had to find out for myself why she... why she was ignoring me." He swallowed hard, his head

hanging low. "I guess I got my answers."

Umber coiled his tail tightly around Flame's. In the sky a bulbous cloud passed over the sun. The vibrant colours of the forest dimmed and the sparkle in the stream and ocean waned.

I feel so helpless, Umber lamented. He stole a few glances towards Flame but the SkyWing still wore the same empty expression, although sometimes moments of pain and anger shifted his features. *How can I ever help him if I don't even understand what he's going through? I've never had to worry about my mother loving me. I had my sibs for that but...who does Flame have?*

A moment later the cloud had passed and as it went the returning warmth seemed to waken nature. The ocean surged against the cliff, the sea foam shooting high in the air, the trees stood taller and the stream bubbled contently as it captured the sunlight and shattered it into a thousand shimmering shards. Umber felt his own scales brighten and he watched Flame from the corner of his eye. *Well...he'll always have me at least. That's for sure.*

The sun was now an unseen presence directly above them, its light warmth spilling out but the orb itself hidden by the thick leaves. It was already high noon. With a jolt Umber remembered Starfish. The SeaWing was probably either already gone or leaving soon to find Flame in Possibility.

"We should go back to the Healing Center." Umber nudged Flame's cheek with his snout. "Starfish will be getting worried." He pulled on Flame's wing but the red dragon remained planted in place. Umber cocked his head to the side. "Flame? What's wrong?"

Flame closed his eyes for a moment before slowly opening them, his jaw setting. "I don't want to go back." He spoke deeply. "My mother sent me there to forget about me...if I go back it would be like...accepting it." Flame's dull eyes hardened as sparks of ice seemed to ignite behind his gaze, growing cold and spreading through his body with a stiffening shudder.

Umber's heartbeat quickened and he swallowed nervously. "But...if you don't go back to the Healing Center then where will you go?"

The shards of ice thawed for a moment and a weak smile parted his lips. "Maybe I'll just stay here." He spread his wings and motioned to their surroundings. He turned to Umber, his head lowered shyly. "You could join me... if you wanted. We could just stay here and be hermits together."

The MudWing pursed his lips, letting out a sigh through his nose. "We could do that," he agreed while taking a step closer to Flame. "We could spend the rest of our lives hidden away from what hurts us...but to be honest, I don't think I could do that."

Flame jerked his head back and looked at his talons, hurt plain across his face.

Umber raised his talons defensively. "No, don't get me wrong. It's just... you deserve so much more than that."

He grasped Flame's talons in his own and took a breath. If there was ever a time to say the right thing, it was now. He just prayed to the Moons that he wouldn't make a bigger mess of things.

"Listen," Umber began. "It doesn't matter why your mother sent you to the Center. Maybe she did it to help you or maybe she didn't but...there are dragons there who *truly* want to help you and care about you." Umber paused, waiting for Flame to react; to give any indication that he was listening. It was therefore a relief when Flame tightened his grip on Umber's talons, although his gaze still remained fixed on the ground.

"Sora, Starfish, Zephyr, Jet... they all care about you so much," the brown dragon continued. He reached up and nuzzled Flame's chin. "And *I* care about you. Please don't make me watch you suffer alone."

Flame glanced up for a second, thoughts churning beneath the surface as he remind silent. Umber patiently waited, hoping his little speech had made the impact he wanted. He knew Flame still needed help; abandoning him on this island wouldn't solve anything.

Time seemed suspended in the silence that stretched between them.

The stillness agonized Umber but he dare not make a sound. If Flame was going to return to the Healing Center Umber wanted to be sure it was because he *wanted* to return. Flame had to be the one to decide.

Finally Flame look up at Umber as if asking a silent question and in the moment their eyes met a warm calm seemed to wash over the SkyWing. He closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them he straightened his spine to sit taller, his head lifted in surety and confidence. "You're right. I guess I forgot I actually have real friends now...and I have you." He leaned down and touched their foreheads together briefly.

Umber melted in relief as a large grin split across his face. The SkyWing then pulled away, shaking out his wings and looking around unimpressed. "Besides, it's not like I have anywhere else to go."

The MudWing nodded, but covertly inspected Flame. He was thankful he had been able to convince Flame to return with him, but he knew the damage was far from fixed. The SkyWing's brittle demeanor was a stark reminder of the broken heart buried beneath.

It was going to be a long and strenuous road ahead for Flame to overcome this pain, but whatever obstacles were in his path Umber was determined to be by his side to face them.

Smiling, Umber stood up on his toes and took Flame's lips in a quick kiss. "Then let's head back."

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Starfish dashed around his office, aggressively putting things away as he prepared to leave for Possibility. Ravage had left the session just a few seconds prior, but the SeaWing didn't have a moment to lose. He knew he should have left earlier, but it would have been immoral to abandon one patient to go chasing after another. Still, he hoped he could reach Flame on time.

He glanced around the room hastily to make sure everything was in place before rushing to the door.
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Let's see, it will take me a little under an hour to get to Possibility...and then I'll have to actually FIND Flame...do I have his mother's address written down somewhere....maybe I should check...

Just as he whipped around to check his file cabinet again he heard a knock on the door. Three precise and aggressive strikes that shook the wooden barrier. Starfish's ears perked. None of his patients knocked like that...and neither did Zephyr. Curious and cautious he formally slid open the door and blinked in surprise as he was greeted by a stern looking female SkyWing. She had a sharp, angular face with orange eyes of the same intensity.

Her eyebrows were angle downwards in annoyance and she was holding a piece of parchment in her right talon.

"Hello," she spoke. "Are you..." she glanced down at the parchment and squinted. "...*Starfish*?" she asked, finally having found his name on the paper.

Part of him was screaming to get out the door as fast as he could to reach Flame, but the polite and curious part of him held him still. "I am..." he smiled warmly. "How may I help you?"

Suddenly the SkyWing snarled and crumbled the parchment in her fists. "So YOU'RE the slimy, dung-brained beetle that's SUPPOSED to be helping my son?!" She stalked forward, forcing Starfish to scramble backwards. He coughed a few times as he accidentally inhaled the smoke coiling from her nose. As she looked down at him with an expression of complete fury Starfish instantly knew who he was speaking with...the way her eyes burned and the characteristic curl of her upper lip when snarling brought to mind another young dragon.

"You must be Avalanche," he coughed again, trying to suppress the nervous palpitations of his heart.

"Yes," she growled, sticking her smoking snout in his face. "*Where. Is. My. Son*?"

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Author's note:

Sorry this update it late, this chapter is a little longer than normal and I wanted to get the emotions just right! Hopefully I succeeded!

P.S. Prince Egret Island is actually based off my home island >:3

Chapter 29

Starfish took a deep breath in, then slowly released. An aggressive headache was bouncing between his temples as he led Avalanche to Zephyr's office...or rather *he* was going to Zephyr's office and Avalanche insisted on coming. He was no longer in a hurry to get to Possibility as the SkyWing had repeatedly pointed out that Flame was no longer there.

"I don't see how this will help us find Flame," she snapped. She was practically walking on Starfish's heels. "Who is this *Zephyr* person anyway?"

"She's the matron of the Healing Center. I need to speak with her and tell her –"

"This is a waste of time!"

Starfish gritted his teeth. "Well if you would just let me *finish* –"

"*You're* his therapist; *you're* the one that supposed to be figuring out the deepest parts of his mind. Shouldn't you have *some* idea where he went?"

Well YOU'RE his mother, but obviously you know nothing about him, the SeaWing silently retorted. "Sorry, runaway plans never came up in any of our sessions," he answered dryly.

For a moment they were both silent. The quiet, respectful scratching of their talons echoing down the hallway was like music to Starfish's sore head.

This all ended when he heard Avalanche huff behind him. "Wait a second...were you *sassing* me?"

Knowing she couldn't see his face, he smirked. "Of course not."

Zephyr's office was one floor above Starfish's, but with a fuming SkyWing on his tail it might as well have been on the other side of the Sky Kingdom. The smoke-induced throbbing of his head had double by the time they left the stairwell and entered the upper corridor.

Thus far his impressions of Avalanche were...mixed. He could already see many of Flame's mannerisms reflected in the female, or at least the ones relating to being angry. But for all her yelling and threatening, Starfish knew it was because she cared about Flame. That was another characteristic she shared with her son: a rough exterior guarding a sensitive core. Over the brief time he had known Flame he had rarely seen it show, but he knew it was there.. It was that sensitivity that made Flame so volatile, but it was also what made him so gentle towards those he cared for.

Starfish sighed, coming out of his analytical stupor. *Avalanche may care for Flame, but that doesn't automatically mean she was the parent he needed. Perhaps, while she's here, I can speak to her about it. Help her to understand how much she has hurt Flame and how strained their relationship truly is.* He internally grimaced. *Great idea, Starfish. Let's tell the dragon that already hates you how terrible of a parent she is. I'm SURE you won't get set on fire.*

Finally they reached Zephyr's door. Starfish raised his closed fist to knock but the door slid open to reveal Jet. The young dragoness immediately smiled before stepping out and closing the door behind her.

"Starfish! What are you –" the striped SkyWing was cut off, her grin fading fast as Avalanche revealed herself from behind Starfish. Jet gave a taut smile. "Hi again, Avalanche. Glad to see you were able to find Starfish," she said, sounding not at all glad.

Avalanche scoffed in her throat. "I could barely read the directions you gave me but I managed."

Starfish darted his gaze back and forth between the two females. "You two have met before?"

"Just this morning," Jet replied. She leaned in towards the SeaWing

who mimicked the motion. "Sorry I didn't warn you she was coming...she kinda threatened to set my desk on fire if I didn't tell her where your office was."

"I DID NOT!" Avalanche thrust her head between them.

"YOU DID SO!" Jet retorted, her head tilted up to meet Avalanche's hostile stare.

"Alright, enough!" Starfish jumped between the two SkyWings who were practically snout to snout. "Now is not the time to be pointing talons at each other, there are more important things to deal with right now...like finding Flame," Starfish reminded, casting a stern glance at Avalanche. With a growl the older female backed off.

"Whatever. Let's just speak with Zephyr already," she sulked, her tail swishing along the floor.

"Oh..." Jet winced, rubbing her talons together awkwardly. "Well...actually...my mom is expecting some dragons over for a meeting any moment now. If you could come back later that would be great."

"Wonderful!" Avalanche sniped, rolling her eyes. "Not only have we wasted even MORE time coming up here to speak with this useless dragon but now we can't even get in to see her!"

We only went up a flight of stairs, it took us less than five minutes! Starfish silently complained. He rubbed the frills at the back of his neck in frustration. "Well how long will they be?"

Jet shrugged. "Not sure. They're the dragons from the Talons of Peace that wanted to –"

"Wait...the Talons of Peace?" Avalanche interrupted; a habit Starfish was finding very frustrating. However her tone made him pause. The SkyWing's eyebrows were drawn together in confusion and she wore a pensive expression. "No one told me the Talons of Peace were coming here..." her voice trailed off.

"Uh...yeah," Jet tried to answer. She gave Starfish a quizzical look but he only shrugged back. He couldn't explain Avlanche's peculiar

reaction any better than the next dragon. "So as I was saying, they're here to take a tour of the place to see if some of their members would be able to get a spot –"

"Who did they send?" Avalanche abruptly stood before Jet, bearing down on the smaller female. "Which *idiots* did they chose to send instead of me?"

"Hello, Avalanche," a voice called from down the hall.

Emerging from the stairwell at the end of the hall, two SeaWings and a MudWing approached. Both SeaWings were the same shade of emerald green that glittered in the light from the windows that lined the hallway; one looked to be about Avalanche's age whereas the second looked hardly large enough to be four years old. The MudWing was probably Flame's age, although Starfish had a hard time getting a good look at his face as the brown dragon was busy routing through a makeshift bag full of food and stuffing it into his maw with vigour.

"I didn't expect to see you here," the larger SeaWing addressed Avalanche and Starfish recognized his voice as the one who had called out prior.

"*Nautilus*?" Avalanche hissed, astounded. Her eyes flickered between the three dragons with a mixture of revulsion and confusion. "The Talons of Peace sent *you* three bug brains?"

"It's good to see you, too," Nautilus responded dryly, obviously used to Avalanche's lack of couth. Beside him the smaller SeaWing began to squirm.

"Daaaad, do I *have* to be here? This is boring, I didn't even want to come to begin with," he sulked before grimacing as some of the juice from the orange the MudWing was eating sprayed on him. "EEEW! And Ochre won't stop eating, it's gross!"

Starfish jolted. *Ah, so THIS is Ochre,* he realized. With a new analytical eye he watched the MudWing try to retaliate with a stuffed mouth only to end up sending more spit onto the SeaWing.

"DAD, MAKE HIM STOP!"

"Squid, be quiet!" Nautilus barked. Starfish raised in intrigued brow. *And* this *must be the 'Squid' Flame has made reference to before. Hmm, well considering how ill he spoke of them I can only assume this isn't going to end well.*

Nautilus cleared his throat and tried to put on a casual smile. "Erm, sorry about them...I brought them along because I thought they would benefit from seeing this place."

"Is that so?" Avalanche sneered. Smoke was coiling out from between her barred teeth as she sauntered forward. "Because, if I recall correctly, I'm still part of the Talons of Peace yet I heard NOTHING about this little visit. Why is that?"

"Uh..." Nautilus rubbed his gills nervously. Starfish sympathized with him. Not five minutes ago *he* had been the target of her wrath. "Well, you've been busy lately...with the egg and all..."

"WHAT!" she bellowed, making everyone jump. Her outburst even caused Ochre to drop his fruit. "How did *you* find out –" her sentenced dropped and her eyes narrowed. "Shrimp told you, didn't he?"

"Of course he told me!" Nautilus flared his wings in exasperation. "He's my brother, and you know how excited he is about it! Besides, Squid and I are delighted to be part of your family now. Right, Squid?"

The larger SeaWing clapped his son on the back while grinning, but Squid ignored his father's rhetorical question. The little green dragon was too busy staring intently at Jet, having just noticed her. His gaze traveled over her lithe body and up to her face where their eyes met. Squid gave her a flirty wink. Jet responded with a tight and uncomfortable smile. Avalanche and Nautilus were still conversing and hadn't seen the exchange. But Starfish saw it, and found it hilarious.

He leaned in towards Jet. "I think he likes you, you should wink back," he teased to which Jet retorted by whipping him with a glare

just as slicing as her mother's. With a chuckle Starfish retreated. As Avalanche continued to bare down on Nautilus Starfish was beginning to wonder if he should intervene. If Avalanche was anything like her son this would probably escalate into a fight eventually, buuuut at the same time he was learning a lot.

So Avalanche DOES have a new mate...and now she is gravid. Hmm, I am starting to get an idea of why Flame ran-away...although it would be extremely helpful if she actually TOLD me what they discussed before he ran off. So far all she told me is that he showed up out of the blue, they argued and then he ran off crying. Starfish's gills flexed as he though. His mood soured. *If he found out about the egg he would be devastated. He was always so paranoid that his mother didn't want him, and then to find out she had started a new family without including him...*

"Just because I'm gravid doesn't mean I'm too busy!" Avalanche's growls brought Starfish out of his thoughts. "Seriously, my SON goes here. Of COURSE I would have wanted to come! Why did *nobody* think to ask me?"

Nautilus, who had been handling this temperamental dragon rather well, was beginning to look nervous. "Ah, well, you see...we know how sensitive you are when it comes to your son and were a little concerned that your...*condition* would make you more...uh..."

"More *what*?" Avalanche leaned in.

"More...emotional?" he offered quietly, wincing.

The red SkyWing took a sharp breath in, craning her neck above the SeaWing as if to strike. "I am in COMPLETE CONTROL OF MY EMOTIONS!" she roared.

Well, I think NOW is a good time to intervene! Just as Starfish readied himself to hold Avalanche back the door to Zephyr's office slid open violently. Everyone immediately froze in place as Zephyr stepped out, her copper eyes intense and critical as she inspected the group of rabble-rousers before her. Her presences seemed to demand everyone's attention. Even Avalanche became meek under the matron's gaze.

"What is going on out here?" Zephyr spoke slowly. "Will SOMEONE tell me why there is a group of dragons SHOUTING outside my office?"

Zephyr was probably the best Soul Healer Starfish had ever met. She had been the one that started the program with Queen Ruby and had been in charge of training the new Healers. She was compassionate, gentle and kind...but when it came to running the Healing Center she certainly ruled with an iron fist. She didn't put up with any nonsense and kept everyone in line. But Starfish understood. In an enormous place full of emotionally and mentally compromised dragons there was no room for petty problems...like a bunch of arguing dragons.

"I think I can explain." Starfish stepped forward and swallowed hard as her intense gaze focused on him. He swept a wing towards the SeaWings and MudWing. "This here is Nautilus, Squid and Ochre from the Talons of Peace. They were on their way to see you but before they could they stumbled upon Avalanche and I –"

"I'm Avalanche, Flame's mother," the deep red dragoness butted in. She pushed Starfish aside and stood before Zephyr, their eyes almost level. "And I would like to make a formal complaint about the services here!"

Zephyr flicked her gaze to Starfish, her eyebrow arched in questioning as if to say '*NOW what did he do?*' Starfish simply shook his head. It was a long story.

With a sigh the matron stepped aside, gesturing for Avalanche to enter her office. "I think we'd better talk."

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Zephyr had decided to send Jet off with the Talons of Peace trio on a tour first. With Squid at her side Jet led them away as Starfish and Avalanche sat before Zephyr's desk.

Zephyr's office was nearly identical to Starfish's; a window at the side, some floor pillows and lots of shelving for files. Although Zephyr had managed to stuff a few more scroll shelves and cabinets
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at the back where she kept her non-patient related information.

"So," Zephyr began, sitting down at her desk like a queen at her throne. "Would one of you fill me in on what's happening?"

Starfish cleared his throat. "Yes, well, this morning I found out that Flame had run away sometime last night –"

"I'll tell you what happened," Avalanche spoke over the SeaWing. "What happened was my SON showed up at my house and YELLED at me for a good half hour. He said all sorts of crazy things about me pushing him away and getting rid of his graphicolls. At the end he said he *hated* me and ran off and I haven't seen him since...and it's YOUR fault!" She swung her head to face Starfish, blowing a gust of hot air in his face, her eyes burning. "Before he came here he was perfectly fine, but YOU'VE been filling his head with hatred for me, haven't you!?"

"*MY FAULT?!"* he shouted in turn, his nostrils and gills flaring. So far he had been *trying* to play the submissive one in this dispute, keeping his arguments down and simply attempting to mediate the situation, but Avalanche's accusation had gone too far. "I've been nothing but supportive of Flame since he arrived here! Everything I've done has been for his benefit and happiness!"

Avalanche snorted. "What a load of dung. I have no idea of what's been going on here so why should I believe you?"

"Uh...well we did send you a letter about a week ago," Zephyr finally joined in, her gaze resting expectedly on the other female. "Have you had the chance to read it yet?"

The fire and brimstone in Avalanche's eyes died down. She leaned back looking guilty. "You...sent a letter?"

The three adults were momentarily distracted as the office door slowly slid open and Jet peeked in, a sheepish grin across her face. "Erm...sorry. I forgot to bring some maps with me for the tour...just ignore me." She tip-toed over to one of the cabinets and began to quietly rummage around.

Avalanche paid the younger dragoness no mind and continued. "Anyway, I...uh...I haven't checked my mailbox in a while so I haven't got a chance to read it yet," she admitted, embarrassed. Zephyr and Starfish exchanged an exasperated glance, which didn't go unnoticed by Avalanche. "Well EXCUUUSE ME, but I've been fairly DISTRACTED lately with the egg and all," she growled defensively. "I hardly have the time to water my plants let alone check the mail for something I had no idea was coming!"

Starfish sighed and rubbed his forehead. There was no point arguing with her, what was done was done. "So I suppose this means you didn't hear about the fight Flame was in."

Avalanche froze, her eyes widening. "What?" she gasped. "He was in a fight?"

"Yes, a little over a week ago Flame got into a scuffle with another patient here. And IceWing named Bergschrund," Zephry clarified. All this information had been in the letter so there was no point withholding it now.

Briskly Flame's mother stood up, sparks shooting from her nose. "That miserable IceWing will regret the day he laid a TALON on my son! I hope he was punished accordingly and kept him FAR away from Flame!"

"Well it was *both* their faults." Zephyr fixed Avalanche with a stern glare. She rested her elbows on the desk and leaned in. "Besides, you don't have anything to worry about. From what Starfish has told me the two of them are friends now."

Avalanche balked and sat down again, her mouth opening and closing in shock. "What – he has a *friend*? An actual, real friend? As in, someone he gets along with and *doesn't* set on fire?"

"Well of course!" Starfish replied, trying not to get offended on Flame's behalf. *Then again,* he thought. *Flame admitted to me that he had a hard time making friends growing up. Perhaps Avalanche's surprise is valid.* Although a part of him couldn't help but think Avalanche could have at least TRIED to hide her shock. "In fact Flame has several friends. Jet here is even one of them."

Jet lifted her head out of a cabinet to beam joyfully, nodding in agreement. Avalanche narrowed her eyes, regarding the young dragoness as if she were some sort of mythical creature.

"Huh..." Avalanche hummed, shaking her wings out as if trying to get rid of an uncomfortable feeling. She turned back to the Healers, her face twisted in annoyance. "Hmph, well, I'm SO glad you all seem to know so much *more* about my son than I do," her voice boiled with scorn. "Is there anything else you'd like to divulge? Perhaps my son has a secret girlfriend you'd like to tell me about, hmm?"

Before either of the Healers could respond Jet barked out a laugh. "Ha! No secret girlfriend but certainly an *obvious* boyfriend. Seriously, everyone knew they would end up – OH HERE THEY ARE!" she cried triumphantly and pulled out a file of maps from the cabinet. When she looked up her smile plummeted like a wingless bird when she noticed the sharp glowers from Starfish and Zephyr. "Uh...just ignore me..." Jet dismissed. "I don't know what I'm talking about...I'll just...show myself out," she hastily murmured before tip-toeing back out the door. But it was too late, the damage had been done.

Avalanche watched Jet leave, her expression flabbergasted. "Wait, I don't understand...is my son seeing someone? Why hasn't he told me? Why am I the last to know everything?" Her eyebrows creased and she glanced around as if trying to find a tether to grasp as her world tilted.

Starfish sighed. Perhaps now was the time for the painful truth. She wasn't going to like it, but for both her sake and Flame's it needed to be said. Carefully Starfish shuffled closer to her, lowering his head to catch her downcast eyes.

"Avalanche," he gently began. "There is a lot you don't know about Flame, and if you are willing to listen I might be able to shed some light on his behaviour...but only if you cooperate."

As expected Avalanche jolted her head up, a sharp comment ready on her tongue, but she held it back. Instead her eyes darted back and forth between Zephyr and Starfish. Doubt, confusion and pain

clouded her orange irises while her talons clenched. Finally she closed her eyes and exhaled. Her proud posture and broad shoulders wilted, even her scales seemed to dull. Whatever front she had been putting on had been shed, and now she just looked tired.

"Before Flame ran off, he said he hated me," she said weakly, her voice gone soft. "If I listen to you, can you tell me *why*? Why does my son hate me?"

Starfish looked to Zephyr who nodded in understanding. Swiftly the matron stood and headed out the door, giving them some privacy. What he was about to say didn't concern her. As soon as Zephyr was gone Starfish looked back to Avalanche and shook his head. "He doesn't hate you, Avalanche. If there is one thing I've learned from Flame is that he loves you more than anything."

This seemed to reassure the SkyWing somewhat, but she still looked confused. "Then...why has he been acting so strange. It started after those wretched NightWings whisked him away to that island...and he got that scar. Ever since then he's just been so aggressive and everything I've done to try and help has backfired." She buried her face in her talons. "What am I doing wrong?"

Starfish resisted the urge to rest a comforting wing on her shoulder. As distraught as the SkyWing was he didn't doubt for a moment she would snap at him if he took it too far. "I know you just want to help your son, Avalanche but...considering what I've learned from Flame I think you two need to work on fixing your strained relationship before either of us can help him."

Avalanche looked up. "Strained? What do you mean that our relationship is strained?"

Starfish swallowed. She wasn't going to like hearing this. "The thing is, your son...he doesn't believe you love him anymore."

A gasp came from the SkyWing before she was standing again, glaring down at the SeaWing with a lashing tail. The fury in her stance was betrayed by the horror and pain pooling in her eyes. "WHAT!" she roared. "H-how could you say such a thing! I love my son more than anything!"

"I know you do!" he assured. "But Flame doesn't. He constantly worries that you're trying to get rid of him. That's why I think he reacted the way he did when you told him about your new mate and hatchling. He saw that as proof you were replacing him."

Avalanche opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. She sat back down, looking at the floor dejected. Perhaps she was finally putting the pieces together, all the clues over the years that things had not been right between her and her son. She fidgeted, her eyes sinking further into her head as she thought.

"But...I love my son," she murmured quietly.

Before Starfish could say anything there was a knock on the door. Five gentle thumps in quick succession. He recognized it as Zephyr's knock pattern.

Leaving Avalanche to her thoughts he opened the door and peered outside. "Hello again, did you need something from your office?" he asked. Surprisingly Zephyr shook her head.

"Actually I found some dragons lingering around your office downstairs so I brought them up," she answered. Starfish furrowed his brow in confusion until Zephyr stepped aside to reveal a familiar red dragonet with another small, brown dragonet leaning against him.

"Hi Starfish," Flame greeted meekly, his tail entwined with Umber's.

"I..." the scarred dragon took a breath. "I want to see my mother."

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Author's Note:

Someone needs to give Starf an aspirin ;3
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Chapter 30

"Hi Starfish," Flame greeted his surprised Healer. Beside him Umber gave his support by entwining their tails together. "I -" he took a breath, "- I want to see my mother."

Starfish studied him for a moment before dipping his head in acknowledgement. "Very well," he said, stepping out of the way.

Flame hadn't been sure at all how he was going to react to seeing his mother. The anger from this morning and ebbed away to leave nothing but cold hollow pain. It perforated every bone, artery, and vein in his body.

But despite the ache in his chest, the stinging like a whip across his heart that never dulled, he didn't hate his mother. He still loved her more than anything.

And maybe that was why, when he saw his mother's slouched figured in the center of the room, the way her eyes lit up when she saw him, he untangled himself from Umber and fell into her open arms without a moment's hesitation.

His mother scooped him up and held him to her chest. "You stupid dragonet!" Her voice was caught between a laugh and a sob. "I love you so much, do you understand? I love you!"

"I didn't mean it, I don't hate you!" he choked out over and over. Surrounded by his mother's warmth the weight in his chest lifted and he weakly he rested his head against her shoulder, taking a deep breath. She was really here. Hugging him. And she had said she loved him.

That was all he had ever really wanted.

Finally they pulled away and Flame was shocked to see tears in the corner of his mother's eyes. He had *never* seen her cry before. With

a tender smile she reached up and brushed away a droplet of moisture running down his own cheek.

"Flame," she sighed, her smile saddening. "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you this morning. I didn't realize..." she paused, closing her eyes for a moment. "I didn't realize how much I've been hurting you. But, I'd like to get a second chance." She grabbed his talons, her enormous paws easily wrapping around his small ones. He felt like a tiny dragonet again.

"Let's redo that conversation," she started. "And this time I promise I'll listen."

Silently Flame nodded in agreement.

"Excellent!" Starfish beamed, startling the two SkyWings. The SeaWing clasped his talons together triumphantly. "I was hoping we'd all get a chance to talk together!"

"Uh...what do you mean by *we*?" Avalanche asked, here eyebrow arching.

Starfish gave her a puzzled expression as if she had just asked which direction the sky was. "Well I'm going to be present of course! Who better to mediate and guide the discussion than Flame's Healer?"

Still close to his mother he felt her tense. "What Flame and I discuss is *private –"*

"Actually mother," he interrupted and she immediately looked to him. "Uh, I think it would be best to have Starf there. I don't want a repeat of this morning."

With a disgruntled expression Avalanche eyed the blue Healer for a good few seconds before acquiescing with a sigh. "Fine."

Starfish grinned.

"Wonderful, I knew you'd come to see things my way" he expressed. "Now how about we have this conversation back in my office? I think we've kept Zephyr from her office for long enough."

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Flame sat under his mother's wing in the familiar office of Starfish. It was strange being so close to her, ever since they reunited in Zephyr's office his mother had hardly left him alone. Hugging him, wrapping her wing around him, preening him...it was nice, but also kind of weird. He couldn't remember the last time she had been so...*cuddly*.

Meanwhile Starfish was plopped at his desk, his talons clasped together with delight as usual. "I'm so glad we can all get together and talk like this," he chirped at the SkyWings.

"You didn't really give us a choice," Avalanche mumbled under her breath. If Starfish had heard the comment then he gracefully ignored it as he shuffled papers around on his desk.

"So," he began, his demeanour snapping into professional-mode. "As you both know there have been some...issues in your relationship and I think it's about time they were addressed."

Avalanche opened her mouth to speak but Starfish silenced her with a flick of his tail. "But before we begin I want everyone to understand that this is a respectful and judgement free zone. Each dragon will get to speak and the others will listen without interruptions or protests until it is their turn to speak. Understood?" The SeaWing glared severely between them.

Avalanche huffed and leaned in towards Flame. "Is he always this annoying?"

Flame shrugged, smirking at Starfish who had *definitely* heard the comment this time. "More or less. Depends on the day," he answered.

"Please save all your flattering comments until I am OUT OF THE ROOM thank you," Starfish quipped. "And I'll remind you we're not here to talk about me; we're here to talk about you two. So let's start with Flame." He glanced towards the small SkyWing with a pleasant smile, his white teeth glowing like his illuminating scales. "Is there anything you'd like to tell your mother?"
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Flame thought for a moment. He had plenty to say, but where would he ever start? His eyes flickered from his mother's tense expression to Starfish's open and encouraging grin. *There is so much I want to talk about but...when I really think about it, its answers I need the most.*

"Erm, could I ask some questions instead?" Flame wrapped his tails around his talons as he looked to Starfish hopefully. "I only have a couple...if that's alright."

The SeaWing hummed in surprise but nodded. "Of course. Say or ask whatever you need to," he permitted. Flame smiled gratefully and took a deep breath, feeling surprisingly calm.

This morning his thoughts had been jumping around like a frog on fire but now everything was a little less chaotic. Maybe it was because Starfish was there, or maybe it was because he was simply too emotionally exhausted at this point to work himself into a tizzy.

Well...here it goes. Time to ask the most terrifying question in my life.

"Mother...you do love me, right? I mean, I know you say you do but...do you *really*?"

His mother's head jerked back as if struck. "Of course I love you! How could you possibly think –"

"Ahem, Avalanche," Starfish bravely interrupted. Avalanche growled but twitched her ears to indicate she was listening. "There's no need to be defensive," the SeaWing's gently spoke. "No one is accusing you of anything. Just answer the question honestly." He gave Avalanche a reassuring smile.

The female groaned but when her gaze fell on Flame her hackles dropped and her expression changed. At first Flame didn't understand what it meant, she had never looked at him like that before. Her eyes were soft yet serious, her ears perked intently in his direction and her head lowered respectfully. Finally in clicked. For the first time she was seeing him as an equal, deserving of the truth, rather than as a hysterical dragonet as she always had.

"OK. I'll try," she whispered and Flame wasn't sure if she was speaking to Starfish or to herself. "Flame," she addressed him, straightening slightly as their eyes met, orange meeting orange. Flame held his breath.

"I love you more than anything. From the moment you hatched you have been my entire world and the sky above as well. So, yes, I do really love you. I always have, and I always will." She pulled him closer with her wing to rest her chin on the top of his head. "My little Flame."

Flame let her answer sink in, trying to hold back the swell of tears pushing at his eye. *This is what I've been waiting to hear my whole life. All those thoughts and doubts that she had never loved me had been wrong. But...why aren't I happy? Why do I still feel so angry?*

Lurking beneath the soothing waves of relief was the familiar burn of rage. Like an old friend it knew each of his insecurities, picking them out and using them as fuel. Flame wiggled out of his mother's grasp, staring up at her defiantly.

"Then why were you never there for me growing up? Why did you always leave me behind?!" he blurted out. It was a stupid question that he already knew the answer to. His mother had told him time and time again how important her work as a spy had been and that the reason she had left him was to keep him safe from the war.

But that answer had never been good enough for him. So now, since his mother was actually taking his questions seriously, he wanted to know more.

Avalanche released a slow sigh like steam being released from a vent. Flame prepared himself for the same reply she had always given him.

"Listen," she began. "I know good and well that I'm a terrible mother."

Well then, Flame balked. *That's certainly new.*

The large SkyWing shuffled her wings awkwardly, gathering her

thoughts. "The truth is, as much as I loved you, I had *no* idea how to be a mother. I hadn't even meant to become gravid. It had been a...surprise."

So in other words I was an accident, Flame growled but didn't interrupt. Meanwhile Starfish was nodding profoundly at his desk, his face scrunched in concentration as he listened.

"It's actually kind of funny," she scoffed, staring up at the ceiling as if recalling something long ago buried. "I had been a guard for Queen Scarlet for many years. The Arena, the war and all the death never bothered me until I laid your egg. Suddenly it hit me just how horrible it all was...the thought of my little dragonet entering this blood soaked world made me sick. That's why..." she paused, casting a quick, guilty glance at Starfish before continuing. "That's why I contacted the Talons of Peace and agreed to be a spy for them," she murmured while shifting her weight from her left foot to her right. She sighed, finally meeting Flame's gaze. "I wish I could tell you I joined the Talons because I believed in justice and peace. In reality I only did it so that would keep you in their camp. I did what I had to do to keep you out of the war; to keep you a*live*."

Flame's eyes were nearly popping out of his head as he listened. "You never told me any of *that* stuff before!"

His mother hung her head. "Because I never wanted you to know how selfish I was. I never cared about the Dragonets of Destiny or ending the war." Her eyes glistened as she spoke, "I only cared about you."

"R-really?" Flame breathed. It was one thing to just *say* you loved someone, but for Flame actions always speak louder than words. *She did all that...just to keep me safe?* She had put her life in danger, betrayed her entire tribe and risked the wrath of Queen Scarlet just to keep *him* safe.

"And that's why I had to keep my distance," she continued. "By joining the Talons I was keeping you safe I was also putting your lift as risk. If Queen Scarlet had ever found you..." she let the sentence drop with a shudder. "Anyway, I'm truly sorry I couldn't spend more time with you. Not that it'll make up for what I did but, for the

record I thought about you every day while I was away."

His chest swelled and he leaned forward and wrapped his mother in a hug. His wings didn't even come close to encasing her but he held her tight nonetheless. "I love you, mom," he murmured against her scales. He felt her wings tighten around him in turn.

"I love you, too."

Bit by bit he felt his broken heart mend. She *did* love him.

"And that reminds me," she added. "I didn't throw away your graphicolls. I just gave them to Shrimp to hold onto while I made space for the egg. I would never toss away something so important to you."

Flame gasped and leaned back to look at his mother, his fangs barred in a glowing smile. She *did* care about his interests after all. When the two SkyWings finally parted Flame glanced over to Starfish to see the Healer with his talons over his heart, a sappy grin adorning his face as he gazed at the tender scene.

Flame felt his mother tense as she noticed the SeaWing as well. "Uhg, why are you still here? You haven't even said anything in forever."

The SeaWing sat straight. "I'm here to ensure everyone plays fairly AND to give helpful and encouraging advice. For example - " he cleared his throat as a calming glow brimmed along his wings and back. It made the blue of his scales pop dramatically, "- Avalanche, you're *not* selfish," he insisted, speaking directly to the large SkyWing. "You must let go of your insecurities. You were acting in the best interest of Flame which is exactly what a good mother should do. I know you haven't been able to spend a lot of time with Flame during the war, but now is your chance to *mend* that rift. There is nothing keeping you away from him anymore."

Flame kept his eyes fixed on his mother as she nodded solemnly. "I...yes, you're right. There's no excuse for my recent absence." She turned to Flame, her orange eyes tender. "I'm sorry I haven't made more of an effort to be with you. I promise to make it up to you. I'll

visit you as often as I can, and wherever you go or wherever life takes you, I'll be there if you need me." She smiled at him and Flame felt like he was going to burst with happiness or some other sappy emotion. Yet there was something still bothering him. Another question that was pounding inside his skull.

"But...why *were* you so distant even after the war? You were always sending me far away like...like you didn't want me around. And every time you looked at me it was like you were disgusted." He jerked his head up to look at her. "Is it my scar? Is that why you kept sending me away? Because you couldn't look at me anymore?"

Avalanche opened her mouth to protest, but quickly withdrew. She glanced briefly at Starfish, her face becoming hard. "I wish I could tell you the answer is 'no', but then I would be lying."

With a sigh Avalanche stood and walked over to the window. She gazed out, the sunlight casting dramatic shadows beneath her brow and along her jaw. Flame took a few steps forward in her direction.

"In a way I am disgusted by your scar," she started, "but not for the reasons you think. Every time I see it I'm reminded of how I failed you. While I was away being their moon-forsaken spy the Talons of Peace gave you to the NightWings! After everything I did for them! They went behind my back and I was helpless to protect you," she spat with a lashing tail.

Flame blinked, not really sure what to take from her answer. "So...you *did* send me away because I repulsed you."

"No no no," Avalanche quickly blurted out, turning back towards her son in a panic. "No, I didn't send you away because of some blemish. I..." she paused, rubbing her eyes with the heel of her talons. "Honestly Flame, I sent you away because I couldn't handle you."

Flame stiffened, trying not to let his hurt show. "*What*? How the hell is that any better!"

Avalanche's shoulders slumped. "Do you really not remember all the fighting? Whenever you came home with that scar you were just so

angry...and I was just making it worse. We would argue and argue and argue about everything all the time...I didn't know what to do... I didn't know how to help you." She shook her head as if trying to rid herself of a swarm of flies.

"So I sent you away in hopes you would be able to find someone who could." She released a sad laugh. "I thought maybe the great Dragonets of Destiny and their Academy would be what you needed but that plan backfired when you tried to *kill* Stonemover." Fear and confusion painted her face. "I was terrified they would throw you in prison so I sent you here, but what I don't understand is *why*, Flame. Why did you try to kill him?" she pleaded for an answer.

The all-too familiar shame that hit him was like pin-pricks along his spine and stomach, turning him nauseous. He could no longer bring himself to meet his mother's eyes.

He had tried so hard to forget what he had done...but ever since he came here his past has been catching up. The apparition of Stonemover in the abandoned castle, the appearance of Icicle and her painfully accurate taunts, and now his mother was here demanding the same questions everyone had been asking. *Why*? Why *had* he done it?

He didn't have an answer.

But then again, he had never really thought about it. *Every time I think about it I feel nothing but guilt and rage at myself. I've tried so hard to push those feelings down, but it never works. They always come back stronger each time and I'm fucking sick of it! I hate being so angry.* Flame sighed as he was hit with a realization. *But I'm always gonna feel like that unless I face up to what I did. Running from it will only make it worse.*

"I think we should move on to a different topic," Starfish piped up, suddenly appearing next to Flame protectively.

Avalanche snorted. "What? Why? Isn't the point of this whole conversation to explore our *feelings* and learning about ourselves or whatever. I want to know what Stonemover did to Flame to upset him so much, and I want to hear it from Flame's perspective!"

"This is a very sensitive topic for Flame," Starfish warned in a low voice. "I think it would be for the best if we avoided it."

Another dose of guilt pumped through Flame as he recalled the tantrum he had thrown the last time Starfish had tried to get him to talk about Stonemover. It was understandable that the SeaWing was hesitant to cross that rickety bridge again, and honestly so was Flame.

Each time Stonemover had been so much as *mentioned* it was like a cactus pod being ignited inside him, exploding everywhere and making a mess of everything which only resulted in more self-loathing.

But I'm not the same dragon I was back then...when I tried to kill him. I've changed and I'm tired of hating myself.

I want this nightmare to be over.

"Actually, Starf," Flame stopped the SeaWing. "I would, uh, like to *try* and talk about it."

Starfish was at a loss of words for a moment before he coughed out a reply. "Are...are you *sure* that's what you want?" He rested a talon on Flame's shoulder, his eyes searching the scarred dragon's face. "You don't *have* to answer your mother's questions just because she's your mother. If they make you uncomfortable then don't push yourself."

"Yeah, I know," Flame answered. "But I want to do this for me."

"Very well..." The SeaWing furrowed his brow nervously. "But if you need to stop or take a break then do so. Just take your time and start whenever you're ready." The two males exchanged a nod of understanding before Starfish returned to his seat behind the desk.

Panic swelled up in Flame, threatening to close his throat and choke him, but as he glanced between the supportive faces of his mother and Starfish the pressure in his chest dissipated. He took a deep breath in, then released. "Well, honestly I don't even know what to say...I hardly remember what happened. It's like a big fog sitting on

that part of my brain..."

"Just start with the basics then," his healer spoke, light rippling over his fins. "Why had you gone to Stonemover in the first place?

Flame shrugged. "I wanted him to heal my scar." The young SkyWing explained what everyone probably already knew at that point. How he had gone to Stonemover to ask if he could use his magic to heal his scar. How he had gone every day to the old NightWing. Eventually it came to the point where Flame had started begging. He had offered the animus treasure, gifts, food, ANYTHING to win his favour but nothing worked.

"That's why I used the dream visitor," Flame admitted, looking at his feet. "I didn't use it for anything else...I just wanted to look in his dreams to see if there was something I could give him...something that would convince him to help me." He grimaced. "But his dreams were as boring and dull as his life! And trust me, his life was SO boring. I should know because I used to sit there and listen to him go ON AND ON about how the water dripping from stalactite to his right sounded better than the stalactite to his left!"

Flame fumed as he remembered the many hours wasted trying to start a conversation with the NightWing, trying to gain his help through friendship...something Flame wasn't particularly good at to begin with. The closest he had gotten to a conversation had been the lengthy lecture the NightWing had given him on animus magic and how it corrupts the soul and THAT was why he couldn't heal Flame. Because his STUPID PRECIOUS soul would crumbled to bits from healing one simple scar.

"At that point I was starting to think he was lying," Flame explained. His breathing was becoming ragged. "That asshole was just *mocking* me! It was never about his *soul*, he just enjoyed watching me *beg*!" Smoke appeared before Flame's vision and he realized it was coming from him. He felt the familiar burn in his throat and nose as the fire in his chest rose up like bile. He *really* wanted to set something on fire right now.

"And then Darkstalker showed up and healed my scar instantly, no fuss or excuses or whining. It had been as simple as I thought it

would be. And that's when I knew that Stonemover HAD been lying to me. That worthless fucking NightWing was just as slimy and putrid as the rest of his tribe! He wanted to watch me suffer! Watching me grovel at his feet like a pathetic whelp! I wanted to teach him a lesson for humiliating me, for being so cruel!"

"Flame, please calm down!" Starfish got up from his desk, slowly approaching the SkyWing as if he were a cornered animal. "Just take a break, alright?"

Flame furrowed his brow in confusion until he noticed how coarse his throat was from yelling so much. His heart and chest were pounding in an erratic fashion while smoke belched from his mouth. Flame took a moment to compose himself as a chill went up his spine. He had been so close to losing control of his emotions, just like he had when he had tried to kill Stonemover.

He slumped down with a talon over his chest, gulping down air. *What the hell is wrong with me? Just talking about it makes me feel like I'm exploding from the inside.* He felt his mother's wing wrap around him like a blanket of calm. "It's like the SeaWing said, don't push yourself," she advised. "Take deep breaths.

"I *do* have a name you know," Starfish mumbled quietly.

Flame leaned against his mother as the guilt quickly forced him to bury his face in her scales. "Why am I like this? Why do I get so angry?" he whimpered, his questions not really directed to anyone in particular. "How do I make them stop?"

"It will take time for these feelings to go away," Starfish spoke from where he sat next to the mother-son pair. "Learning to forgive yourself, to accept that you made a mistake and that you've learned from it will help you overcome this anger at yourself. As your Healer I will help you through this process, alright?"

Flame lifted his head from his mother's side and gave a curt nod to the SeaWing.

Silence spread between the trio for a few minutes before Avalanche spoke up. "Well...if Flame feels this guilty then why not just go to

Jade Mountain and talk to Stonemover directly. See if he will forgive Flame and then we can all move on with our lives."

The matter-of-fact tone she used threw Starfish and Flame off and it took them a few moments to register what she was actually suggesting. Finally it clicked.

"WHAT!?" they exclaimed together.

"That's...a bit drastic, isn't it?" The SeaWing refolded his flared wings close to his body. "I don't think Flame is ready for a confrontation yet –"

"And how long will it take before *you* decide he's ready?" Avalanche barred her teeth at blue dragon. "Months? *Years*? I refuse to make my son suffer a moment longer. The only way for him to forgive himself is if he gets Stomemover's forgiveness first."

Starfish's gills pulsed. "Well I disagree. Flame needs to FIRST forgive himself and accept his actions before going anywhere near Stonemover. In case it didn't occur to you, Stonemover might not forgive Flame. And then what, hmm? Then we're back to square one!"

Avalanche snorted. "We should at least *try*! Besides, I think it's up to Flame to decide how he wants to handle this." Suddenly her orange gaze was locked on him. Flame gulped. "Well, Flame? What do *you* want to do?"

"Uhhh....."

"Don't put him on the spot like that!" Starfish snapped. Despite being smaller than Avalanche he certainly wasn't afraid of the large SkyWing's wrath. He latched on to Flame's shoulders, yanking him away from Avalanche and sat the young dragon down right beside him. Flame simply let himself be dragged around as the atmosphere in the room tensed.

"Uhh...." he reiterated but neither adult was paying him any attention.

"Flame needs to take things slowly, to come to terms with his

actions and feelings in his own time! It would be irresponsible to rush him!" the blue dragon argued and the once soothing pattern of lights running along his wings increased their tempo to a more threatening display.

Avalanche growled in turn, grabbing onto Flame again and pulling him away from the SeaWing and back to her side. "But we could have all this solved in a couple of days if we just GO there and talk to Stonemover. Why do we have to drag this out? The solution is simple, why are you complicating things!?"

"*Complicating things*!" Starfish repeated in disbelief. "I'm not complicating things! *You're* the one that knows nothing about psychology! These things can't just change overnight, they take time and –"

"Blah blah blah." Avalanche rolled her eyes. "How complicated can it be. Besides, what makes YOU an expert? Are you even a real doctor? Can you even locate my kidneys?"

Starfish looked ready to rip his horns out. "Yes I'm a real doctor! Yes I can locate kidneys and YES I AM AN EXPERT!"

"WOULD YOU TWO SHUT UP?"

The adults recoiled in shock as Flame wiggled out of his mother's grasp and stood before them with the sternest expression he could muster. "I'd REALLY appreciate if you two didn't kill each other over this. This is something I need to decide for myself."

"That's what I *said*!" Avalanche threw her wings out in exasperation. Starfish shot her a silencing glare and she shot it right back at him.

Wow, is this what it feels like to deal with me? Flame wondered as he watched his mother stare down his Healer.

"Anyway," he continued. "I'd like some time to think about it though - I - I'm not sure what the best choice is."

What am I saying? he screeched in his head. *The further away I am from Stonemover the better...but what if my mom is right? What if talking to him is the only way to get over this? At this point I'd do*

anything to make this anger go away.

"Of course. Take all the time you need." Starfish smiled.

"Whatever you decide to do I will support you," Avalanche added. She approached her son and rested her snout on his forehead.

Flame took a breath, reveling in this small moment of peace because he knew it wasn't going to last long.

His whole day had been an exhausting emotional ride, but in the end he had finally set things right with his mother and for the first time in a looooong while he actually felt loved.

But now Stonemover was looming over his shoulder like a persistent weight on his mind.

Should he confront the NightWing? Would it help or just make things worse?

Was he even *ready* to see Stonemover? The last time he had seen the dragon was through a hallucination and THAT had been enough to send make him panic. To see the real thing...he'd probably throw up and faint.

Flame shuddered. He still had to make a decision.

And whatever option he chose, he *knew* it was gonna suck.

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Author's Note:

My longest chapter yet! WHEE, I hope you enjoy!
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Chapter 31

By the time Umber found Flame the sun had long been down and the sky was an inky black pool speckled with starlight. After spending the day searching the SkyWing's frequent haunts the MudWing had finally decided to check the cafeteria as a last resort.

As soon as he entered the vast dining area the decedent aroma of chocolate and fudged grabbed him by the nose and pulled him in. It dragged him to the back of the room where the cooking stations and kitchens were placed. Come morning they would be bustling with activity as dragons lined up with their plates, but at the moment everything was eerily still. All the rooms and stations were closed and locked off...all but one which had the unmistakable flicker of fire silhouetting the entrance.

Umber pumped his wings in triumph. There was only one dragon he knew that would be cooking this late and it was the EXACT one he was looking for. He made a running start towards the light but quickly pulled himself back in wary hesitation. The last time he had seen Flame the SkyWing had been a shadow of gloom, his eyes red from crying and a miserable frown sinking his face.

Whatever had happened between Starfish, Flame, and Avalanche was a complete mystery to Umber. Was Flame still upset? Did he make amends with his mother? Were they one big happy family again?

Umber's stomach was knotted with worry. Not knowing what to expect the mud dragon carefully approached the door and peered inside.

As predicted Flame was within, his ruby scales twinkling as the fire light licked his flank. He was standing in front of the huge gaping mouth of the stone oven as a hearty fire roared in its hearth. When Umber's eyes adjusted to the light he finally noticed the partially illuminated mess that covered every table and counter top: bags of

sugar and cocoa with their contents spilled all over like a fine layer of dust, several bowls half full of batter stack up in an unstable tower, fudge smears on the walls and chocolate chips speckling the floors.

The only time Flame ever baked anything THIS chaotically was when something was bothering him. Still, Umber couldn't help but be slightly amused. It was a delicious disaster.

"What *happened* in here?" Umber laughed, walking in.

Flame jumped and turned around, his bored eyes lighting up. "Umber!" he exclaimed in delight before narrowing his eyes in accusation. "Where the hell have you been? You just disappeared when I went to talk to my mom."

"Erm, sorry about that," the MudWing apologized and took a step forward only to freeze as his talons squished into something soft and warm. He immediately recoiled and brought his foot towards his snout to identify the mysterious gooey substance. With relief he realized it was only some semi melted fudge. Humming in delight Umber licked his talons clean, ignoring Flame's amused smirk. "As I was saying," the MudWing continued in between the smacks of his lips, "I'm sorry I didn't stick around. Zephyr shooed me away once you went into her office...and to be honest I think it was for the best. You had to talk with your mom alone. It's not like I had anything to contribute to that conversation."

Flame narrowed his eyes further, observing Umber with mock scrutiny before throwing his talons up in over-dramatic exasperation. "OK *fine*, I guess that's a good enough excuse. You get out of trouble THIS time."

Umber dipped his head in pretend gratitude, struggling to hide his giggles as he put on the sincerest voice he could muster. "Thank you, oh merciful one. I am not deserving of such forgiveness."

"Pfft," Flame covered his mouth and turned away to hide the glowing smile that warmed his whole face and crinkled the corners of his eyes. Umber's heart quickened. Flame was so beautiful when he smiled.

The tight knots in his stomach also relaxed at the sight. Umber observed Flame with a thoughtful expression, watching as the SkyWing took an oven-mitt and began poking impatiently at whatever chocolatey concoction he had placed in the oven. Flame seemed to be back to his usual self, the dark cloud having lifted and the spark back in his eyes.

With these positive signs Umber felt brave enough to ask, "So...how did it go? With your mother and all." The MudWing wrapped his tail tightly around his talons as he waited.

"It...went really well actually," he replied, the relief in his voice evident. Flame removed his mitted talon from the oven and quickly blew out the flame that had latched on to the glove. He threw the smoking mitt on the floor next to a pile of more burnt mitts and Umber couldn't help but wonder just how many times he had set something on fire.

"She actually listened to me this time!" the SkyWing exclaimed with a small smile. "We talked like normal dragons instead of just yelling at each other like we usually do...although she did yell a lot at Starfish...ANYWAY the point is I learned all those fears I had were stupid." Flame's smile widened and Umber tried not to swoon. "My mom even promised to spend more time with me! She had to go back to Possibility tonight but she'll be back tomorrow. I can't remember the last time we got to spend a lot of time together...maybe we'll go in town? I bet she knows a bunch of cool places to go!"

The excitement vibrating off the SkyWing was contagious. Umber walked forward and bumped his head against Flame's neck, his own face a reflection of the SkyWing's joy. "That's great! I'm so glad you two were able to work everything out." Umber paused and nuzzled his snout into Flame's scales, releasing his pent up anxiety in a sigh. "To be honest I was really worried about you. It's just such a relief to see you happy again."

Flame wrapped a wing around the smaller dragon while blushing deeply, obviously touched by the MudWing's words. "Jeez, Umber. If you get any sappier I might throw up."

Umber chuckled before retorting, "Oh come on, I've been WAY sappier than that! On a sappiness scale of 1 to 10 that was *maybe* a 2 at the most."

Flame's low laugh resonated in Umber's ears like a sweet melody. "Well you're right about one thing; you *have* been way sappier before." Sifting through the pile of burnt mitts Flame pulled out the least damaged of the group and reached into the oven again. A moment later he pulled out a tray of perfectly domed chocolate muffins. "Want one?"

"YES!" Umber bellowed and gingerly picked up the steaming mountain with the tips of his claws to keep the fleshy parts of his talons safe. "So *this* is what you've been making. Honestly from the mess of this place I was hoping it was some sort of cake bomb but muffins are nice too." He blew on the hot pastry, trying to cool it down before his impatient stomach convinced him to eat the inferno of chocolate. "Besides, I always thought you were more of a cookie kinda guy," Umber added and briefly looked to Flame.

The SkyWing had set the tray down on a table and copied Umber's technique of picking up the muffin with his claw-tips. "Oh I am, but, uh...well, I needed a distraction from some stuff so I thought I would try to replicate that mud-muffin recipe of Poppy's. I've been messing around with different batters trying to get it just right." The SkyWing's shoulders slumped as he gazed at the muffin and frowned. "This is my fifth batch and I still don't think I got it right."

Umber stopped his blowing and stared at the red dragon. "*Fifth batch*?" He repeated. "Wha – where are the rest of the muffins?"

"Relax, Mud-muffin," Flame winked, not missing the opportunity to use Umber's nickname. "I put them away for now but I'll take them out tomorrow morning and put them out with the other morning foods. I'm sure *some* dragons will eat them."

Umber tried to hide his sulk as he glanced around the room for any clues as to where this hidden hoard of muffins was kept. "Or..." Umber offered, glancing at Flame nonchalantly. "I have an even BETTER idea..."

"No, Umber. I'm NOT going to give *all* the muffins to you to eat," Flame droned, peeling away the paper wrapper that hugged the base of the muffin he was holding.

"Come on! Please?"

"No! It's not healthy to eat that many sweets!"

"I could handle it..."

"It'd probably kill you."

"Would not!"

"Would you just shut up and eat your muffin?" Flame huffed but was obviously amused as indicated by the grin on his face. He gazed down at Umber affectionately before turning away to take a bite of his muffin, crumbs falling from his mouth.

Umber followed suite and as soon as his fangs sliced through the soft, bready skin the gooey chocolate and fudge within coated his mouth. He closed his eyes and hummed his contentment. He had no idea if these tasted like Poppy's but they were still delicious.

"Damn it," Flame mumbled through crumby lips. "Still not right. Guess I'll have to start over."

Umber cocked his head to the side, taking a contemplative bite of his muffin as he watched Flame take out a clean bowl and starting dumping ingredients every which way.

"Wow, I've never seen you this, uh, *determined* to bake something," Umber said as he gulped down his bite. "Whatever's bothering you must be pretty serious."

Flame visibly stiffened, his talons stuttering in their smooth motion to pour in the sugar. The hesitation only lasted a moment and soon Flame had regained his composure. He dumped the rest of the sugar in, his expression cool. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm fine. Perfectly fine." Grabbing a nearby wooden spoon Flame began to frantically stir the mixture, causing a cloud of flour to spray into the air. "In fact, I've never been better!"

Umber finished off the last of his muffin, dusting the crumbs off his talons and shaking his head in exasperation. "Really? After all we've been through you STILL don't want to talk to me about stuff that's bothering you? I won't force you to talk but," Umber approached Flame and softly rested a talon on the SkyWing's arm, forcing him to stop his crazed stirring, "I just want you to know I'm here for you. You know that, right?" Umber pressed his forehead against Flame's neck and heard the red dragon sigh.

"Yeah I know," he admitted. His shoulders slumped as he gazed into the bowl of mushy clumpy batter...if you could even call it that. Umber wasn't an expert but he was pretty sure you needed water as well. "Sorry I'm being so weird," Flame added, pushing the bowl away. "I guess I just keep forgetting I have dragons to talk to. I don't need to keep it to myself."

"Don't worry about it, that's why I'm here to remind you!" the MudWing nudged Flame. "So what's on your mind?"

Flame furrowed his brow and began unconsciously picking apart the muffin he had been eating until it was a pile of crumbs. "My mother wants me to go see Stonemover," he finally said in one, quick breath.

Umber balked. "Oh," was all he said. Another moment passed as it sunk in. "Oh dear," he murmured gravely.

Flame nodded. "Yep. I'm fucked."

"Wait wait wait." Umber held a talon up while shaking his head. "What do you mean she wants you to go speak to him? Does she want you to go right away? What did Starfish say about it?"

Flame pinched the skin between his eyes and groaned. "Essentially this is what happened..." the SkyWing briefly described the events of the 'Mother-Son session' and where it had lead. There had been a lot of yelling but by the end of it Starfish had insisted on waiting until Flame was emotionally ready before speaking to Stonemover whereas his mother was adamant in her opinion that it was a simple matter of just apologizing. She claimed he would never be able to get over his guilt unless he first received the NightWing's

forgiveness. In the end the adults allowed him time to think it over and come back to them with his decision on how they should proceed.

"Well at least they were polite enough to let *you* decide," Umber remarked once Flame had finished speaking. "I can't believe your mother would suggest that! Doesn't she realize how...uh..." the sentence faded as Umber scrambled to think of a nice way to put it, "...*upset* you get about the Stonemover thing?"

"No need to beat around the bush, Umber. I go bat-shit crazy. It's OK. You don't have to be polite about it." Flame's voice was laden with self-reproach. His ears were angled downward as were his eyes while his talons still searched around the counter for more things to tear at.

Umber's heart lurch at the downcast expression. *Poor Flame. He's been through so much recently and his demons are still chasing him. I know* he's *the one that has to face them but ...UGH I wish there was SOMETHING I could do.* More than anything Umber wished he could just whisk Flame away to some far off place, far away from Stonemover or anything that would make him upset. A place where they could eat muffins and read graphicolls all day long.

But since he couldn't do that the MudWing did the next best thing.

Gently he grasped the SkyWing's antsy hands and pulled them close while Flame's eyes shot up at the touch.

"I know you feel guilty about what you did, but try not to let it ruin your life," the mud dragon advised, trying to hide his uncertainly. Even though he had been giving out quite a bit of advice lately he still was never sure if he was saying the right thing. Despite these insecurities he gathered himself up and tried to say something other than useless word vomit. "And whatever decision you make about the Stonemover thing just...do what feels right. Don't worry about what your mother or Starfish thinks...or even what *I* think. Just...listen to your heart." He let out a low chuckle when Flame teasingly rolled his eyes. "OK that was definitely a five on the sappy scale."

"I'd say it was at least a seven, but it was still solid advice so...thanks." A shy, grateful smile appeared on the SkyWing's face briefly before dipping into a frown. He squeezed Umber's talons and looked back to the ground. "But to be honest it's not *making* the decision that's bothering me. I've already made it...I've just been trying not to think about it because it fucking sucks and will probably not end well but at this point does it even matter?" With a puff of smoke Flame released Umber's talons and aggressively began clean up his mess with an air of resignation, no longer in the mood to continue his muffin crusade. Meanwhile Umber sat motionless, staring at Flame with utter befuddlement.

"You made the decision already? *That* quickly?" He gaped. Flame only nodded in response and Umber was forced to probe further. "So...who's plan are you going to go with? Starfish or your mother's?"

The SkyWing's eyes seemed to absorb the firelight, capturing its flickering movements and burning intensity. "Neither."

They sat silence for several moments before Umber spoke, "Uh...come again?"

The SkyWing shrugged. "I didn't agree with my mother *or* with Starfish," Flame meagerly explained. He dumped some spatulas into the sink with a painful clatter before crossing his arms over his chest, leaning on the counter. "The thing is I have no idea if getting Stonemover's forgiveness is going to get rid of all this guilt. All the anger I feel, all the shame...it's because I'm disgusted with *myself*. Starf hit the nail on the head with that one. It's my own forgiveness I need." The red dragon turned his head to the side to gaze into the still burning oven, the light illuminating the winding scar as it traveled over his hard features. "But I still want to set things right with Stonemover," Flame uttered, his gaze still sinking into the fire. "To...offer him an explanation or something. I also need to get over this fear of him that I've built up in my head. I have to face him."

Umber slowly nodded and waited for Flame to say something else. When it was clear the SkyWing had said all that was to be said Umber carefully spoke up. "I remember when we went to the abandoned part of the castle you had that panic attack from seeing

him. Is...that what you mean when you said you fear him?"

"I don't know but ever since the...*incident*," Flame paused in his speech, closing his eyes tightly and taking a breath. "No. I have to face what I did." Opening his eyes Flame re-started the sentence, his words strained and slow. "Ever since I tried to *kill* him he's been terrorizing me. It's probably just the guilt but it's eating me from the inside out. I need to prove to myself that he's not out to get me or...something." The SkyWing threw his talons up in the air. "I don't even know what I'm talking about but the point is I need to see him...even if it kills me which it probably will."

With a guttural sigh Flame slumped on the floor, deflated. Umber remained where he was and watched the disgruntled SkyWing, a fond smile appearing on his wide maw. He sidled up to the slouching dragon and slumped down beside him, resting his large head on the SkyWing's shoulder. "I'm proud of you, Flame," he whispered, giving the ruby cheek a quick kiss.

Flame's face reddened, brightening as a small smile formed on his lips which quickly transitioned into one of self-mockery. "Don't be. I haven't done anything yet. I still might chicken out and run away."

"You're wrong," Umber stated with complete surety. "You've already done so much. You're definitely not the same dragon you were when you first came here and no matter what I'll always be proud of you." The brown dragon poked his square snout affectionately against Flame's face, the same side that displayed the scar.

Flame's face looked strained and puckered as if he were trying VERY hard to not break into a giant, dorky grin. In the end he failed. "You're gonna make me barf it you don't cut it out with all this mushy stuff." He nudged Umber while bashfully avoiding his gaze.

Umber's heart leapt at the adorable display. "Good," he stated, nudging Flame in return. "Maybe then you'll stop sulking."

Flame whipped his head to face him, his eyes glinting with mischief. "Excu*uuuuuse* you! I'm not sulking! I'm brooding mysteriously about my dark and tortured past. All superheroes do it

before they face down their nemesis in the series finale."

Now it was Umber's turn to try and keep a straight face. "Ah. Yes. Of course. I totally believe you and that's DEFINITELY not the dorkiest thing you've ever said."

Crossing his arms again Flame tried to strike a serious face. This effect was partially marred by the fact that he accidentally slid down further into his slumped position, practically laying on the floor. Still, acting as if it was all part of his plan Flame tilted his head up haughtily while Umber swallowed his giggles. The urge to kiss him was getting infinitely harder to fight.

"Well it's *true*," the floor dragon insisted. "The superhero always has this boring monologue scene where he comes to terms with some sort of *emotional strife* inside of him before boldly running of towards the evil guy's liar. It's a fact."

"So after we're done talking you're going to boldly run off to Jade Mountain?" Umber wiggled himself down towards the ground to match Flame's position.

The ruby dragon huffed. "Nah. I should probably talk to Starf about it first. He'll probably want to –"

With a lurch Flame's sentence dropped and his eyes widened. He shot up into a standing position, every muscle tense. "Crap," he uttered. "CrapcrapcrapcrapCRAP!" He buried his face in his talons while continuing his string of profanities.

"Flame! What's wrong? Are you OK?" Umber shot up as well, alarm ringing in his voice.

Flame tossed his head back and let out an angry groan. "Stonemover's at Jade Mountain. At *Jade Academy*. I can't believe I forgot that! I can't go back there!" His voice became shrill with panic. He tucked his wings in protectively. "Everyone's gonna know who I am and what I did. Icicle said it herself that there are rumours going on about me."

The red dragons face had paled to pink, his pupils pin-pricks of fear.

Umber quickly wrapped his brown wing around the taller dragon's caved shoulders in a desperate attempt to offer support.

"As soon as I walk into that school everyone will be looking at me...judging me, whispering behind my back..." Flame shook his head with blank eyes and leaned into Umber's embrace. The MudWing pulled Flame in close the best he could, frowning in sympathy. Flame had been in a particularly dark place during his time at Jade Academy so it was no wonder that he wasn't eager to go back. However, Umber was *also* struggling with the idea of returning. His time spent at the school hadn't been all sunshine and daises. The memories it brought up were bittersweet.

He remembered all the excitement he had felt, going off on this adventure to be part of something new, the nervous but exhilarating butterflies he had felt when meeting his new winglet and hoping they would like him, his eagerness to start learning about the different tribes and to spend more time with Clay!

Everything was supposed to have been perfect.

But interspersed through these memories, like welts of rot on a dead log, were the not so great moments. Like how as soon as they had arrived Sora had begun acting strange and nervous. She closed herself off from him, refusing to tell him what was bothering her while at the same time constantly looking over her shoulder as if expecting an attack.

Then there was the explosion.

And the deaths.

Icicle's furious roars chasing them.

Then they were fleeing for their lives.

Umber quivered and shook the chills out of his spine. He turned his attention back to Flame who was wearing an intense expression, his brows furrowed and eyes gazing straight ahead at the wall.

"So does this mean you're *not* going to go speak to Stonemover after all?" Umber was careful to use a neutral tone of voice. He didn't

want to inadvertently influence Flame's decision.

The SkyWing didn't answer right away, but as Umber watched him he noticed the colour returning to his face. His brows lowered to form bold ridges over his now sharp eyes, the fear gone. He sucked in a deep breath through his nose and released it the same way, his jaw clenching.

"You know what?" he finally asked. "Fuck it."

"Oh?" Umber commented, although he wasn't sure if Flame was even listening. The SkyWing was on his talons now, pacing around the room with a resolve.

"Who cares what those assholes think. I'm *so close* to having all this bullshit behind me. I can't turn back now."

Any other dragon might have been fooled by the SkyWing's stony gaze and steady voice. They might have wrongly assumed that Flame had miraculously overcome his fear and, like a warrior on the front-lines, was ready to dash towards his destiny, danger be damned.

But Umber knew better.

The way Flame's talons tapped nervously on the granite floor, the subtle movements in his jaw that indicated he was grinding his teeth and the tenseness in his wings as he pulled them close to his body were all stark clues to his real feelings. He was still terrified.

Yet he was not going to back down. He was going to face his demons despite the limb-freezing fear that coursed through him.

At that moment Umber couldn't have been more proud and impressed with the red dragon. He padded over and coaxed Flame to sit down before wrapping his thick tail around the SkyWing's leaner appendage. "I think it's really brave of you to go back there," Umber murmured, "and I'll be with you every step of the way. I promise. I won't leave your side until all this is behind us."

"Really?" Flame cocked his head, blinking in confusion and awe at Umber's gleeful smile. "Does that mean you're going to come with

me to Jade Acedemy?" Gentle susurrations of relief penetrated the SkyWing's voice as he regarded Umber with bright eyes.

"Well duh!" Umber spoke before timidly shuffling his talons. "Erm...that is if you want me to go with you."

Flame rolled his eyes and tugged playfully at Umber's ear. "Of course I want you there, you cheese-ball!"

Umber laughed and swatted Flame's talons away. The two exchanged several more playful swipes before, by some unspoken agreement, they leaned forward and touched noses.

"Thanks," Flame breathed, his eyes mere inches from Umber's. The MudWing wasn't sure what he was getting thanked for, but he accepted it by placing a kiss on the dragon's scarred snout.

"Anytime."

After several moments of embracing the two split apart and decided they should really clean up this mess before going to bed. It was getting late and tomorrow was going to be a hard day.

"I'll tell Starf tomorrow morning what my plan is," Flame thought aloud as he filled the sink with soapy hot water, "and I'll tell my mom about it whenever she gets here." He dipped a talon into the already murky water and pulled out a drenched wash-cloth. "I don't know how soon we'll leave but my guess would be in a few days probably."

Umber nodded silently since he knew Flame's wasn't really looking for a reply. He stuffed the bags of sugar back in the pantry and sighed.

Going back to Jade Academy was going to be hard for him as well, but if Flame wanted him there then by the Moons above he would go.

Where ever Flame needed him, that's where he'd be.

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Author's Note:

Here, have some Flumber fluff before we get into the final chapters of the story :3

Chapter 32

Distinguished Teacher Sunny,

Hello again, I hope you are doing well. It if wasn't obvious from the return address on the letter this is Starfish again, Soul Healer to Flame, your previous student. We corresponded some time ago about Flame's history at Jade Academy, specifically on the topic of Stonemover. Anyway, Flame has requested I write this letter to you on his behalf to request a meeting among the three of us. There are important matters he would like to discuss in private and we would be most grateful for your cooperation!

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Starfish of the SeaWings

Flame leaned back from where he had been reading over Starfish's shoulder at the freshly written letter.

"Well? Is everything to your satisfaction?" the blue dragon asked as he wiped his talons clean of ink.

"Meh. Good enough," Flame shrugged as he brushed over the letter once again. "Although, 'distinguished teacher' is pretty dumb sounding."

"Agreed. It sounds like you're trying to suck up to her," Avalanche voiced, not that anyone had asked her to share her opinion in the first place. As promised she had returned first thing that morning and, much to Starf's reluctance, had joined their session. She was now craning her neck high above the blue dragon to peer down at the letter on his desk, inspecting it with displeasure. "Are you trying to win her favour through flattery, SeaWing?"

Starfish's ears twitched at Avalanche's steely voice as he stuck the cork back into the ink bottle. "I do admit it's a bit fluffy, but I don't know how else to address her. Once I learn what her actual, official title is then I can use that instead." He placed the bottle back in the top drawer and pulled out an envelope that already had the address printed on the front. With a sigh he folded the letter and placed it gently into its paper package. He paused.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?" he asked Flame for the tenth time. "I've told you before, it wouldn't be any trouble for me to go over there in person and speak with them first. I could get everything settled before you arrive –"

"No. I need to be the one to speak to them," Flame insisted once again. "If you tell them I want to speak to Stonemover they'll probably throw you out for trying to get me close to him. I have to be there to show them that...well...I'm not a psychotic killer anymore."

At least I hope *I'm not,* he silently fretted.

Starfish heaved another sigh and inspected the almost sealed envelope once again, his talons wrinkling the fine paper.

"Oh stop being such a wuss!" the red dragoness hissed and snatched the letter from Starf's timid talons. She took a stick of wax already waiting on Starf's desk and melted it with a gust of hot breath before letting it drip into the back of the envelope. Just as the red liquid congealed she pressed the wax seal against the paper, pulling it away to reveal an ornate symbol of falcon, wings spread and talons outstretched, with a sprig of herb in his beak.

It was apparently the symbol for the Healing Center and, even though Flame wouldn't admit it, it *did* look kind of cool.

"There. Done." Avalanche promptly tucked the letter into a small satchel beneath her wing. "I'll make sure it gets to the post office safely. Of course, I COULD just deliver it myself," she flashed an accusatory glance towards Starfish, "but apparently SOME dragons would find that rather *uncouth*."

Starf put on his signature smile, clasping his talons together almost as if in prayer. "Thank you, Avalanche. That would be great."

Flame couldn't help the wry grin that pulled at his mouth. He could see the strain in Starf's face as the SeaWing tried to interact politely with the obnoxious and opinionated female. But then again, if Starf could handle Flame then he could handle his mother.

"Anyway, that's all for today. You're free to go," the SeaWing sprang up from his seat and walked the pair to the door. "We should get a reply in a couple of days. I have no reason to believe she'll deny our request so be ready to leave as soon as we hear back."

With a nod of understanding Flame stepped into the hallway while his mother held back.

"You go on ahead," Avalanche directed to her son with a warm gaze. "I'll meet you outside the building. There's something I need to *discuss* with your Healer."

The SkyWings exchanged amused grins as Starfish's groan echoed from behind them. His blue faced popped up in the corner of the door that was currently being blocked by Avalanche. "Don't tell me this is about you coming with us to Jade Academy. I've already told you that won't be necessary."

Avalanche rested her fiery gaze upon the small SeaWing, her face a cold sheet of disdain. "Oh, I think you'll find my arguments very *convincing*."

Starf deflected the intimating stare with a withering sigh. "Threatening to set me on fire isn't an argument," he countered dryly.

Avalanche let out an offended snort. "I wasn't going to threaten you!" she exclaimed in a not very convincing manner. "Honestly, why does everyone think I'm so violent?"

Luckily for the SeaWing his skeptically raised brow went unnoticed by the red female. Slouching his blue shoulders in defeat the Healer motioned for Avalanche to rejoin him at his desk with a sweep of

his wing. "Fine. We'll discuss this like rational adults in my office. So, if you would please stop looking at me like a maggot covered carcass then we can get this discussion underway." With that Starfish's head disappeared from the corner of the door as Flame assumed he had went back to sit at his desk.

Avalanche flicked her ears and lowered her head to Flame's level, her voice a low murmur. "Well isn't he sensitive. I mean, seriously, that was NOTHING like my 'maggot covered carcass' face. If anything it was closer to my 'shut up or I'll punch you in the throat' face."

Flame would have laughed had his mother not been one-hundred percent serious. Instead he offered a shrug. "Just try not to kill or maim him if possible. He's a giant dork but I'd hate to have to get a new Healer."

"I can hear everything you two are saying!" a huffy voice shouted from within the room.

His mother barred her fangs in a large grin. "No promises," she hopefully joked. "Anyway, this shouldn't take long. I'll see you soon." She nuzzled the top of his head and swiftly slid the door shut.

Flame could already hear the muffled voices from behind the door, their pitch rising and falling but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Not that it mattered.

He took a shaky breath. Now that he was alone, in the silence of the hallway, things were beginning to settle in his mind.

The letter had been written.

Now it only needed to be sent and then...

Then he would be off to Jade Academy to face Stonemover.

In a moment of vertigo his mind reeled with the realization that his plans were coming to fruition very quickly. *Too* quickly. Maybe he should call the whole thing off. Starf was right, he needed more time to-

NO! Flame slammed his clenched fist into the ground, imagining that beneath his talons the cowardly thoughts that plagued him were crushed to bits. *You're not backing out of this you ass! Nothing is more pathetic than a coward. What would Umber think of you if you gave up? Or mother? Or Starf?*

He unclenched his fist and leaned back. The anxiety was still there, swarming his head like a cloud of flies, but at least he was aware of it. He wasn't going to get tricked into giving in to his fears. No matter what he would see this plan to the end.

"Uh-oh, you have that panicky look on your face again."

Flame's ear flicked at the sound of the familiar voice. From the staircase at the end of the hall Umber emerged wearing that shy but worried smile that made Flame's heart pound. If Flame remembered correctly Sora's session was right after his. Umber had probably just walked his sister to the door before coming downstairs to meet Flame.

The two dragons met each other halfway in the hall and bumped heads affectionately.

As Umber's scent filled his lungs the fearful buzzing in his head weakened.

"Is it that obvious?" Flame asked and winced as Umber answered with an affirmative nod. He kept forgetting that there was no point hiding emotions from Umber. The MudWing always seemed to know what he was thinking before HE even knew. Flame rubbed the back of his neck and pulled his lips into a taught line. "Yeah, well, I guess I have a lot to be nervous about. Like Stonemover. And Jade Academy. Oh, and did I mention Stonemover and his animus magic that he could kill me with? Yeah. *That's* something I just remembered could happen."

To Flame's surprise the brown dragon let out an exasperated laugh.

"Flame, listen to me: You're *not* going to die!" Umber assured, resting his tail-tip on the SkyWing's shoulder. "You're working yourself up over nothing."

"*Nothing*?" Flame repeated with a hint of malice. "You don't get it, do you? I tried to kill him, Umber. Of course he's going to hate me! What if he shoots me with lightening or warps my mind like Darkstalker? What if –"

Flame's mind blanked as Umber's lips collided with his. The MudWing boldly ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth, causing Flame's pulse to spike. After the initial shock of the MudWing's sudden action settled the tension in Flame's body melted into a warm simmer. Relaxing, he closed his heavy eyelids, his body pressed against Umber's to the point where the MudWing had push back to avoid being toppled over. A frustrated moan escaped his mouth when Umber cupped his face and pulled them apart, a playful and affectionate grin curling his freshly kissed lips.

"You overthink things," he said while stroking Flame's cheek. The SkyWing tried to let out a disgruntled huff but against his will it came out as a joyful chuckle.

"Yeah...you're right," Flame accepted. He still wasn't completely convinced that this adventure to Jade Academy wasn't going to be the end of him. Still, a warm smile stretched the length of his face as his eyes met with Umber's. With his body still tingling with intimacy Flame leaned forward, a wolfish spark dazzling in his fiery eyes. "In fact, I think I'm starting to overthink again. I might need another kiss."

The MudWing's smiling face bloomed red and in one silent breath he brushed his lip up Flame's chin towards the taller dragon's awaiting mouth.

"Flame! I thought I told you to...meet...me...."

The two males jumped apart as Avalanche padded towards them. Her face transitions to one of triumph (Flame assumed she must have won the argument with Starf) to confused and finally to blushing embarrassment. "Uhm...what's going on here?" she asked as if it weren't painfully obvious.

"U-um. Well...mother...this is Umber," Flame stammered and motioned towards the wilted MudWing with his tail.

"He's...uhmm...he's my....we're....we've been..."

A claw of nervousness wrapped around Flame's throat as his mother regained her composure. She glared down at the small MudWing with new found scrutiny. Instinctively Flame reached a wing towards Umber to pull him close. Umber, to his credit, didn't flinch nor drop his gaze as Avalanche stepped forward to peer down at him.

"It's...uh, nice to meet you," the MudWing dipped his head politely at the female.

Avalanche raised a scaled brow. "So *you're* my son's boyfriend then?"

Even with nothing in his mouth Flame still managed to choke on his own spit. His whole face and chest burned with mortification. From the corner of his eye he saw Umber bury his blushing face into his talon. It wasn't that he was embarrassed to be seen with Umber, but the fact that it was his MOTHER who had just seen them kissing...well...that just made it worse somehow.

Flame's mind was spinning. How did she know? Did Starfish tell her? No, he wouldn't do that. But more importantly, how the hell was he going to explain this weird not-technically-dating-but-still-dating relationship to his mother?

"That annoying dragon that runs the front desk mentioned you had a MudWing boyfriend," Avalanche stated and Flame silently cursed Jet, "and since you two were *canoodling* mere moments ago I'm going to go ahead and assume that's him." She crossed her arms over her chest and tipped her snout up. "Well, what do have to say for yourself, young man?"

Taking a momentary break from his humiliation Flame glanced at his mother in confusion. "What?" he asked. A second later he reeled back as his mother's smoking snout nearly careened into his face.

"I'm your *mother* yet I was the last to know about your relationship! Why didn't you tell me sooner?!"

Flame could easily counter that complaint with the fact that his mother had been COMPLETELY UNREACHABLE for the past few weeks. Even if he HAD written her she wouldn't have even seen it. Before he could make that point his mother's attention had turned to Umber. She whipped her head to face the small MudWing, causing him to release a muffled 'eep'.

"And YOU," she scolded, "you better not break my little Flame's heart or you'll regret the day you ever hatched!"

"MOTHER!" Flame exclaimed in dismay, squishing Umber against his chest protectively. "Umber is the kindest, sweetest, and nicest dragon in Pyrrhia! He would never do anything to hurt me in any way!"

With his cheek smooshed against Flame's scales Umber attempted to vigorously nod in agreement. "I-I promise I'll take good care of Flame. He's really important to me and I swear, I'd never let anything bad happen to him!"

The sincerity of the small dragon's voice made Flame blush. He turned his head away, hoping his mother wouldn't notice.

Avalanche snorted but backed off. Perhaps it was a trick of the light but to Flame she also appeared to relax somewhat at Umber's words. "Well let that be a warning to you *just* in case you decide to break that promise, MudWing." She sent the brown dragon one last glare before seemingly ignoring him altogether and turning her attention to the parcel under her wing. "Anyway, I'm all set to head out. Are you ready to leave now, Flame? We can stop at the post office on the way there."

Flame jolted before bursting into a smile, the previous awkward moment quickly dissipating. He had nearly forgotten that he and his mother had made plans to spend the day in town. Excitement coursed through him, turning him into a scaled ball of energy. He was finally going to spend time with his mother!

"Yes! Let's go!" he practically shouted. As his mother made her way to the stairwell Flame gave Umber a quick kiss on the nose. "I'll see you later."

"Have fun!" Umber whispered back while Flame bolted after Avalanche. She was waiting for him on the first step. He brushed against his mother's side and she responded by tucking him under her wing like she used to do when he was small.

As they descended Flame felt an itch of a question irritating his mind. He stole a few glances at his mother's impassive face before clearing his throat. "So...uh...what did you think of him?"

"Of the MudWing?" she clarified. Silence hung between them before she finally spoke with a lopsided grimace. "He's very short."

Flame barked out a laugh. Of all the things his mother could fixate on she decided to point out his *height*.

"OK, but other than THAT what did you think? Did you like him?"

They reached the bottom of the stairwell, entering into the Cafeteria. It was usually empty by the time Flame got out of his session and today was no exception. They walked through the giant archways into the sunlight. Avalanche released a nasally sigh.

"Do *you* like him?" she suddenly asked. Flame knitted his brow at the odd question.

"Well *yeah*. He's my best friend and so much more. I trust him more than anything, he's so special to me I –" Flame rambling was brought to a quick end once he noticed his mother's amused smile. Embarrassment seeped onto his face. "Ahem. Yeah. Anyway, yes I do like him."

Avalanche continued to smile as they made their way towards the gardens, looking for a place to take off. "So long as *you* like him then it doesn't matter what I think. I just want you to be happy, Flame. So if this *Umber* makes you happy then I will...tolerate him."

"Fine. I guess that's fair," the ruby dragon accepted with a bit of disappointment. "I just don't want the two most important dragons in my life to hate each other."

"Oh I don't hate him! I'm just cautious about these things. I'm sure I'll warm up to him eventually."

With those vague words of reassurance the mother and son pair reached a clearing next to a bed of lilies. The sky was clear and blue while the lulling breeze pulled on their wings, inviting them for a soar. Flame pumped his wings, filling the fibrous membrane with blood in preparation for takeoff.

"Once I drop off this letter how about some lunch?" Avalanche suggested. "While I lived here there was this sandwich place I used to always go to."

"I'm down for whatever...as long as it's not muffins. I've had WAY too much of those recently."

Laughing at his mother's confused face Flame took to the sky first and flew in circles as his mother joined him. Together they flew into the city. All the fretting that had weighed him down was now nothing but a feather as he glided beside his mother.

Maybe things will work out, he thought with optimism. *Maybe the worst is behind me.*

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The Next Day

Sunny sat at the entrance to Jade Academy, her eyes scanning the cloudless sky while her talons tapped a nervous rhythm on the stone floor.

Well, nervous was a bit of a strong word. Apprehensive. Yeah. That sounded better.

Sunny was most certainly apprehensive about a lot of things.

Yesterday she had received an ambiguous letter from the new Healing Center in the Sky Kingdom. She was already familiar with the author of the message: Starfish. They had exchanged numerous letters in the past. Starfish had initially written requesting information about Flame but soon the two became frequent pen-pals as Sunny had become curious about the whole idea of being a Soul Healer. Although she didn't want to become a doctor, she couldn't help but see the benefit of applying Soul Healer practices at
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the school. Maybe she could learn a thing or two about it and become a counselor or something! Helping students deal with their emotional and personal issues sounded a lot better than just lecturing them for a few hours a day.

So mixed with the apprehension was a little buzz of excitement about the idea meeting Starfish face to face and learning more about what he does.

But for each ripple of enthusiasm a wave of dread followed close behind as she thought about who the SeaWing was bringing with him.

Flame: the dragon who had tried to kill her father.

The rhythm she was tapping stuttered and changed as she stretched and refolded her wings apprehensively. Sunny was trying really really REALLY hard to not to be so judgmental towards the SkyWing.

Flame had certainly been through a lot before he had come to the Academy. If she were going to judge Flame for his actions then she would have to equally condemn dragons like Sora, Icicle and every other student that might have killed someone. And considering that they had just come out of a war there was a good chance most of the dragons in the Academy had blood on their talons.

Jade Academy was about second chances. Forgiving the past but not forgetting it and moving forward together was pretty much what they were going for at this place. If she couldn't give Flame that same forgiveness and opportunity to make amends then she really had no right to teach at this school.

Coming to a decision Sunny sat straight and blew out a short sigh. The blue dragon beside her stirred.

"You've been starting at the sky all day! Have you *finally* decided how you're going to reply to the letter?" Tsunami probed, her voice exceptionally bossy today.

The gold dragon gave a curt nod of affirmation, trying not to let her

annoyance show. She was still mad at Tsunami for opening Starfish's letter before Sunny had even known it arrived. For some reason the SeaWing saw it as her Moon given right as head of the school to stick her nose into everyone's business and voice the opinions no one asked to hear. Now was no exception.

"Well I hope you write a strongly worded letter back saying that Flame is no longer allowed *anywhere* near the school and if he so much as sticks a *toe* through the door he's going to earn himself the beating of a lifetime!"

Sunny fixed her friend with a dismayed gawk. "Tsunami, I'm *not* going to let you beat him up! Besides," she added more quietly, "I've actually decided to accept their request for a meeting."

The blue dragoness balked, her gills pulsing. "WHAAAT?!"

"He deserves a second chance just as much as anyone else!" Sunny defended before Tsunami could begin her spiel. "Sure he's done some bad things –"

"Terrible things," Tsunami inserted.

"– but maybe he's changed since then. I think we should hear what he as to say," Sunny finished with a pleading huff.

Tsunami remained silent for a moment, her stubborn features locked in a painfully skeptical fashion. After several seconds her mouth slipped into a smirk. She rolled her eyes and let out a half-hearted laugh, something she usually did when Clay told her a particularly bad pun. Sunny steeled herself for the talking-down she was about to get.

"Sunny, it's nice that you're trying to be optimistic," the sea princess chided, "but it's time to be realistic here! You remember how aggressive and mean Flame was when he was here. Do you *really* think spending a month at some healing place has magically changed all that? The fact is we can't trust. He's already proven himself to be a danger to those around him." Tsunami's eyes soften as she rested a talon on Sunny's arm. "I know you want to help him but having Flame back here is just *begging* for trouble."

Hiding her disappointment in a sad expression Sunny gently lifted Tsunami's talon off her arm. "I think you need to have a little more faith in dragons, Tsunami. They're not as terrible as you think."

Fed up with the SeaWing's attitude Sunny retreated back into the cool shelter of the cave system that made up the school. She hadn't expected to get Tsunami's blessing, although it would have been nice. Either way, it didn't matter what Tsunami said. Sunny knew she was making the right choice...but there *was* one other dragon she needed to speak to before writing a reply letter.

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"He's coming back here?" Stonemover rasped with more emotion that Sunny thought he was capable of. Unfortunately that emotion sounded a lot like fear. The many torches that Sunny had installed around the cave flickered off the NightWing's knitted brow, amplifying the worried expression. "When will he be here? What does he want?"

"I haven't written back to them yet. I wanted to ask you first what you thought." Sunny approached her father and rested a small golden talon atop of his. "If it makes you that uncomfortable for him to come back then I can always say no, but, honestly, I don't think he's going to hurt you." She paused to re-light one of the torches that had been blown out by the swishing of her tail. *I wish I could put more light down here. Maybe it would cheer him up,* Sunny thought before remembering Starflight had been against the idea due to something he had called 'carbon monoxide poisoning'. Shaking the distracting thoughts away Sunny continued, "He's been seeking help at the Healing Center in the Sky Kingdom, the one I told you about. His Soul Healer will even be coming with him....I don't think you have anything to be afraid of, father. I think he just wants to talk."

A slow blink was the only response he gave to her words. After what seemed like ten eternities Stonemover released a looooong sigh and gradually turned his head, revealing the strip of claw marks along his neck left by Flame.

"What does it matter?" His voice rumbled like stone. "If he *does* end
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up killing me it's not like anything of value will be lost. Do whatever you want, Sunny. I died long ago."

Sunny was torn. A part of her ached to wrap the dejected imagine of her father in a comforting hug while another part wanted to swat him on the nose for being such a dismal blob.

She compromised by leaning against his arm in a reassuring manner while she lashed out a scolding, "You're NOT dead and you're NOT worthless! So stop being a giant mope and just *tell me* how you feel about all this!"

Of course he didn't say anything. He continued to look away, a glassy sheen forming over his deep green eyes. Sunny knew he was in one of those trances of his. Everything was tuned out.

Disappointment and frustration weighed on her spirit as she backed off and sighed. Sometimes she just wanted to yell at him until he came to his senses.

"Fine," she mumbled to herself. "If you won't make a decision then I'll make it for you." Sunny turned away to leave but paused. She looked over her shoulder once more, her brows furrowing at the sight of her father. *I just hope I'm right about all this. What if Flame* hasn't *changed? What if –*

Sunny snapped her eyes shut, forcefully banishing the negative thoughts.

She wouldn't let her fear get the best of her. She had to give Flame the chance to redeem himself!

With even more determination than before Sunny ascended the cave and headed towards her office. She had a letter to write.

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Author's Note:

So this is my first time writing for Sunny's POV! Let me know what you think :3 I probably wrote her a little more serious than normal but I think it suits her ;3
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Chapter 33

Simply put, Umber had not slept well.

Just as he had been going to bed, a steaming cup of chamomile tea on his nightstand, Flame had appeared at his door bearing good news: Sunny had returned their letter and accepted their request for a visit.

"We're leaving tomorrow after my session with Starf," Flame had informed him. "Meet me outside of the Cafeteria. We're gonna leave from there."

"Great!" Umber had said with a smile as false as his excitement. When Flame had left, Umber had crawled into bed and stared up at the ceiling until the dooming glow of dawn percolated through the cracks of the blinds. He must have fallen asleep around then because the next thing he remembered was Sora waking him up.

She had been shocked when he told her he was going to Jade Academy that day. Everything had been happening so fast he had forgotten to mention that he was even *thinking* of going to the school. But, despite the worrisome crease in her brow, Sora was as kind and supportive as ever, even offering to wait with him at the meeting place and see him off. After a short breakfast and some small talk the two sibs now sat in tense silence for what was to come.

Despite his agitation it felt nice to be out in the sun, his dark brown scales soaking up every drop of warmth that poured from the blinding orb in the sky. It was no mud bath but it was still pretty nice.

He took a deep breath, the sweet smells of baked goods from the dining area mixing with the earthy fragrance wafting from the garden. The end result smelled something like a grass stuffed pancake covered in dirt and coffee which...didn't actually sound all

that half bad. Umber was willing to try anything once.

"So...do you think you'll see Clay?" Sora interjected. Umber was pulled from his food-based daydream and forced to think about the source of his anxiety: Jade Academy.

Umber shrugged. "It's hard to say...he's probably going to be really busy, being the awesome teacher he is and all."

"Well what about your other friend? Turtle was his name, right? Will you talk to him?"

Umber perked. He had been so busy these past few weeks he had hardly thought about Turtle. Was he even still at the Academy? "Uh...I don't know...it would be nice to see him if he's around..."

His sentence trailed off. Would Turtle even *want* to see him? Sora and Umber had fled the school pretty quickly without any explanation...would Turtle think he had had something to do with the explosions and deaths? No, of course not. Moon and Qibli probably told him what had happened. But what if everyone *else* thought that? Umber shuddered to think of the rumours that must be circulating about them.

"Umber, are you OK? You seem kinda distracted." Sora cocked her head to the side, observing him with inquisitive brown eyes.

"Oh, uh, it's nothing. I'm fine. See?" He gave a cheery grin to emphasize just how fine he was.

Sora humoured him with a small laugh before giving him a probing nudge with her wing. "Come on. You're my sib, I know when something's bothering you." She paused, lowering her voice before continuing. "Is it because of the Academy? Are you nervous going back?"

On instinct Umber forced his features to relax, softening his exaggerated smile into a more genuine shape and crinkling the corners of his eyes ever so slightly. It was fake of course but he hoped it would be enough to convince Sora. He didn't need her worrying about him; she had been through enough as it was. "Don't

worry about me, OK? I'm fine, I promise." He held her gaze confidently through the façade.

His gut twisted awkwardly when Sora didn't smile back. Her left ear twitched as it often did when she was frustrated. She peered down at her talons and when she spoke her voice was tight. "Umber...when are you going to start treating me like I'm normal?"

Umber's smile dropped but before he could say anything Sora clasped her talon over her mouth. Mortification spread thickly over her face. "I-I'm so sorry, Umber. I shouldn't have said anything...erm, just forget it." Her gaze traveled sporadically around the gardens to avoid meeting his line of sight.

That awkward twist in his gut gave another lurch. He wasn't sure *what* exactly had just happened but obviously he had upset Sora...the one thing he was trying NOT to do. Had he said something wrong? Had his voice betrayed his feelings somehow?

I was focusing too much on my face and forgetting my voice! Stupid Umber! he chastised himself. Whatever the cause, he had to fix it.

"Please, don't apologize," he urged, resting his tail across hers. "I didn't mean to upset you...let's just drop the whole topic of Jade Academy, OK?"

Sora shook her broad head, slumping her shoulders in a sigh. "It's not Jade Academy that's bothering me."

"...Oh." Umber furrowed his brow. "Um...well then what's wrong?"

She began to wring her talons together, an expression of distress across her face. "Promise not to get mad at me?" she whispered.

"What!? Of course I won't get mad!" Umber insisted, offended that she would even think that. "I just want you to be honest. So, please, tell me what's wrong."

Sora's eyes darted around his face as if checking his sincerity. Seemingly satisfied the he truly wanted to hear what she had to say she exhaled slowly. "OK, well, before I say anything I just want you to know how much I appreciate you."

"Oh...thanks!" Umber smiled. He was kind of confused as to where she was going with this, but still flattered. "I appreciate you too."

Sora shook her head, her eyes serious. "No, I mean it, Umber. You've been with me since the very start of this disaster, and, honestly..." she closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath as if gathering courage. "....I don't think I would have made it without you. You've been the one stable thing in my life that I've been clinging to and during the darkest time in my life you were there at my side every step of the way," she paused, her eyes swelling with emotion. She then reached out and wrapped Umber in a hug. "I'm just so grateful that of all the dragons in Pyrrhia I got you as my brother. I love you so much, Umber."

Umber, being the major sap he was, had to force his lip from trembling at the heart-wrenching confession. He hugged his sister back tightly. "I love you too, Sora. There's *nothing* I wouldn't do for you and if you need me by your side for the next hundred, thousand, or million years I'll be there."

"I know," she responded before pulling away from the embrace. She smiled sadly. "Just like I know you've been protecting me this whole time, hiding your real feelings so that you wouldn't upset me, treating me like I'm so fragile I'll explode or shatter if you so much as *sneeze* too loudly."

Umber's mouth fell open.

"Oh, don't look so surprised," she said. "We grew up together, Umber. Did you really think I believed you all those times you pretended everything was fine? I know you better than you think."

Umber attempted to sputter out some lame excuse or explanation, but everything he tried to say only made the stern expression on his sister's face deepen. Finally he gave up just as a guilty bulge replace the twist in his stomach. It sat in the center of his body like a heavy log that made his head sink in shame. "So... you've been able to tell when I was lying this whole time, huh?"

"Not *always*," she answered. "Only when it was obvious." She sighed and leaned forward to rest her head against his. "We used to tell

each other everything. Remember how we used to stay up all night talking..."

"...and Reed would have to split us up so we'd actually get some sleep," Umber finished the memory with a laugh. Sora smiled as well, true and genuine before the somber expression returned.

"It's like there's this wall between us now," she murmured. "I just want things to be like they used to be...do you think it'll ever be like that again?"

Umber grasped his sister's talons and answered as honestly as he could, "I know it will." He gave her a smile, a real one. "And – I'm sorry I haven't been honest with you. I just –"

"You just wanted to keep me happy. I get it." Sora features softened as she squeezed Umber's talons in return. "And I *am* happy. Well, at least now I am. I know I still have a long ways to go before, uh, before I'll be able to go back to the Mud Kingdom and live with the others, but I think it would help if you started treating me like normal."

Umber pursed his lips, hesitation pulling at his chest. Keeping his feelings from Sora had become almost second nature to him. Baring her from his worries and concerns so that she wouldn't be burdened with them.

But now he realized that by doing so he had severed an important link between them. He still felt a little uneasy venting to Sora, but she was right. How would she be able to fully recover if he kept coddling her like a hatchling?

Umber sighed and looked into his sister's eyes. "Are you sure you're ready for the full Umber experience?" he asked, half joking. "It's not for the faint of heart."

It made Umber happy when she laughed and rolled her eyes. "I think I can handle it. And to start, why don't you tell me how you *really* feel about going back the Academy."

Umber internally groaned as his sister grinned triumphantly. She

wasn't going to let him worm his way out of this conversation. "Fine. I guess I *am* pretty nervous." He rubbed his talons along the spines of his neck. "I can't help but get this bad feeling that they're gonna be talking about us behind our backs. I mean, I *know* I shouldn't care what others think and to just ignore them and blah blah blah but I *do* care and it's annoying! I just don't want –" Umber paused and looked at Sora apologetically. "I don't want them to say bad things about you."

Sora frowned. "Well I *did* do some pretty bad things, Umber. Of course dragons are going to be talking about it. I'm sure Flame feels just as uneasy about all the rumours going around about him."

Umber winced as even more guilt twisted around in his gut. He had been so preoccupied with his own issues he had forgotten that Flame would be going through all this as well but on a much more personal level. Umber sighed. Maybe Flame would have some advice on how to handle dragons talking behind your back....but knowing the SkyWing it would probably involve setting someone on fire or some sort of violence.

"I guess I'll just try to avoid everyone. I can't be bothered by something if I don't expose myself to it," he suggested with an unsatisfactory huff. Sora tilted her head in confusion.

"Avoid everyone?" she repeated. "What about seeing your friends? You've always told me how much you've missed them."

Umber shrugged glumly. "Sure I want to see them, but I don't know if *they'll* want to see *me*. It's been such long time." He shuffled his talons on the ground, accidentally flicking a pebble towards a sapphire-blue SeaWing sitting a few meters away. Luckily she was too focused on the map in her talons to notice the stone hitting her tail.

"Of course they'll want to see you!" Sora said, bringing Umber back to the conversation. She poked his snout, causing him to smile. "Why would it matter if you haven't seen them in a while? I'm sure they've missed you."

"Yeah, but they all went on this crazy adventure together to stop

the forces of evil while I've been gone!" He threw his talon in the air, drawing the attention of the map-reading SeaWing. She briefly turned confused, cloudy-grey eyes towards him before frowning and looking away.

"They're probably all super close with each other now," Umber continued, drooping his head. "I'll just be an outsider."

Sora tilted her head to the side, narrowing her eyes. "Umber, you know that's not true," she insisted matter-of-factly. "You and I are proof of that."

Umber furrowed his brow. "We are?"

"Of course!" she stated confidently. "We're super close with our sibs but that doesn't mean we can't have other close relationships too. I can't speak for your friends but even if they *did* become a tight-knit group that shouldn't mean they value you any less. Well, *real* friends wouldn't think like that anyway."

Umber hadn't spent *that* much time with his old winglet, but they had all seemed liked genuine, good dragons. He knew Sora was right, he was just being over-dramatic about it as usual, letting minor issues become obsessions.

"Yeah," Umber agreed. "That's a good point. I'll try to keep that in mind if I get the chance to talk to them." He gave his sister an affectionate nudge. "Anyways, thanks for listening to all my dumb problems."

She smiled, her face lighting up with a warm glow. "Thanks for telling them to me. I appreciate it."

The knot it Umber's stomach finally untwisted and he relaxed his tense wings. He had opened up to Sora again and everything turned out fine, not to mention she had given him some useful advice.

I should trust her more. She's so much stronger than she was when we got here, not to mention how frail she was at the end of the war. We might not be exactly as we were before this whole mess started but we'll get there eventually.

A loud, exasperated sigh to his left jolted Umber out of his thoughts. He looked over to see the same SeaWing as before scowling in frustration at the map. She was turning it upside down, then sideways and then right-side up again before thrusting onto the ground with a huff. A light breeze shoved it towards him and he finally saw that it was a map of the Healing Center. They were in all the welcome packages each patient received when they arrived.

"Um, excuse me?" Umber spoke, picking up the map and taking it over to the SeaWing. "Do you need some help?"

The blue dragoness turned to face him, the freckles on her face quickly being overshadowed by a deep blush. "Oh, uh, sorry," she mumbled and nimbly took the map in her talons. "I don't normally throw my stuff on the floor. This map was just making me really angry...and...sorry again." As she turned away to place the parchment beneath her left wing Umber couldn't help but notice the tense way she was holding her right wing. He craned his neck slightly to get a better look, wincing at the plethora of scar tissue and cuts embedded in the membrane.

"A*hem*," the sea dragon loudly proclaimed, glaring at Umber and twisting the right side of her body away from his view. Before Umber could apologize Sora approached from behind to stand at his side.

"H-hi, is everything alright?" she asked them both. Now with a crowd of two the SeaWing seemed to tighten up even more.

"Yeah, I'm fine," the blue dragon practically whispered, looking at her talons rather shyly. "I was just trying to find the physio clinic and, uh, got a little lost..."

"It's on the third floor I think...I could show you if you'd like," Sora offered. Both females were speaking in such a quiet voice that Umber had to strain his ears to keep up with the conversation, but, despite her initial timidness, the SeaWing perked.

"That would be great. Thanks." The blue dragon smiled. "I'm Storm by the way."

His sister nodded. "I'm Sora."

"And I'm Umber!" Umber added, just in case anyone was wondering.

Sora turned back to him as if suddenly remembering he was there. "Oh, ah, is it OK if I leave you here alone?" Sora asked, her face painted in a fretful expression. "I promised I was see you off..."

Umber waved her concerns away with a flick of his tail. "Don't worry about it. The others should be here any minute now so I'll see you when I get back."

Sora smiled gently and leaned in to give him one last hug before joining Storm, leading her through the archway into the Main Building. At the same moment the familiar red figure of Flame stepped out into the sun, nearly tumbling into Sora. The two exchanged amiable nods as they passed, but when Flame looked at Storm the SeaWing merely scowled back and continued inside without looking back.

Flame approached Umber with a furrowed brow of confusion. "Who the hell was *that*?"

"Her name's Storm," Umber answered, assuming that's who Flame was referring to. "I think she's new here. Sora is showing her around."

Flame curled back his upper lip in displeasure. "Isn't that Jet's job? Wow, they need to fire her ASAP."

Umber stifled a laugh just as Avalanche and Starfish emerged from the shade of the interior. The Healer was wearing a little bag stuffed with notes and other scrolls while Avalanche was sporting her usual glower...or maybe the sun was in her eyes. It was hard to tell with her.

"Ah, Umber, good to see you," Starfish greeted. "Here to see Flame off?"

Umber ducked his head, coughing awkwardly. "Oh, well actually I – uh – was going to go with you... I thought Flame had already asked..." Umber slid Flame a quick, accusatory glance.

Starfish's smile turned into a tight-lipped line as he, too, shifted his eyes onto Flame. "As a matter of fact, no, he didn't tell me."

Flame, who was picking his teeth with the talon of his pinky-finger, merely shrugged. "Umber's a free dragon; he can go wherever he wants. Besides, if things start getting tense his adorable face is probably going to come in handy." Flame winked at Umber who, despite trying super hard to frown in annoyance, blushed at the compliment. The MudWing's frustration was double when Flame seemed to become amused by his conflicted face.

Meanwhile Starfish was rubbing his temples in soothing, rhythmic circles while groaning. "We don't have time to argue about this, we're already late as it is," he said before checking the position of the sun. "He can come, but that's it! If anyone else shows up wanting to tag along then I'm turning them away."

"Hmph," Avalanche vocalized her displeasure. "Why is it that when *I* asked to come along I had to fight tooth and claw, but when *he* wants to come," she flicked her tail at Umber, "there's no problem?" She squinted at the SeaWing, her glare wrapping around him like talons. "It's almost as if you don't want me around or something..."

The Healer coughed nervously. "Ahem, well, we should be off! No time to waste!" he declared. With several frantic flaps he became airborne, flying several meters in the air before hovering it wait for the others.

"Hey! Get back here and answer me!" Avalanche bellowed, pumping her massive wings to reach the SeaWing.

Umber and Flame exchange amused glances, although Umber noticed the smile didn't quite reach Flame's eyes.

"Hey, you alright?" Umber asked, gently tapping Flame's wing with his own.

"Yeah, I'm just – I'm fine," Flame responded weakly. "Starf and I had a last minute session just now so I'm just trying to get my thoughts straight I guess."

Umber nodded, unsure whether Flame wanted to talk about it or just be left alone to think. The sky dragon was no doubt nervous; hopefully the flight there would help him calm down.

"We don't have all day, boys!" Avalanche shouted at them from above, her shadow splayed on along the ground like a smudge.

"Uh, coming!" Flame shouted back. With haste the two males took to the sky, flying side by side as they trailed after the adults. As the ground sunk away Umber's stomach did the same. He looked over to Flame who seemed to look exactly how Umber felt. Carefully the MudWing sidled up to Flame and brushed their wing tips together. The red dragon returned the gesture with a grateful smile that made Umber's heart melt.

Well, whatever happens, Umber thought, *at least we'll be facing it together.*

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Author's Note:

Hey friends! Sorry for the long update wait. Now that the story is coming to an end I have been spacing out the updates more while also trying to work on my other story that I've been neglecting. :3
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Chapter 34

Flame was not fine.

Well, he wasn't full blown *panicking* but he was pretty damn close.

With every stroke of his wing and every mile crossed his chest tightened. It was like a giant talon wrapping around his rib-cage and squeezing until his lungs felt pressed against the walls of his torso.

Alright, Flame. Calm down. He gave himself stern shake. *There's no need to panic. Just remember what Starf told you. As long as you follow his advice everything will go perfectly fine...probably.*

Flame tried not to focus on the 'probably' part and instead forced his attention on what he remembered Starf telling him during the last minute session before they had left. Luckily it had only been an hour ago so the whole conversation was still pretty fresh in his mind...

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~ One hour ago ~

"Now Flame, I just want you to understand that it's OK to be nervous," Starfish spoke in soothing rhythms, his glowing scales in sync with his words. "I know this isn't easy for you."

Flame nodded, sitting stiffly in front of the Healer's desk. There was no point pretending to be brave; the blue dragon could see through him as if he were made of glass. Still, Flame tried to muster some sort of dignity as he spoke, "So, um, what should I even say to them? I mean, I wasn't exactly their best or most liked student."

Beside him Avalanche snorted angrily. "Well that's hardly *your* fault. How were you expected to perform your best at school when *they*
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could hardly run the place!? Honestly, one day there's explosions and the next Scarlet herself shows up throwing decapitated heads all over the place!"

"That's a bit of an exaggeration," said Flame. "It was only *one* decapitated head."

"How charming," Starfish dryly commented, his lips pulled back in mild disgust. "Anyway, I think it would be best if you didn't criticize their teaching abilities as soon as you walk through the door."

"OK, then what *should* I do?"

Starfish looked Flame square in the eye. "Apologize to them."

Both SkyWings reacted with furious hisses.

"*Apologize*!?" Flame repeated in seething disbelief. "What for? I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Weren't you listening to me, SeaWing?" Avalanche joined the fray. "It's the teacher's fault, not Flame's. If anything THEY should be apologizing to the students for their poor planning and lack of forethought."

Starfish folded his talons together and calmly leaned back in his seat as if he had been expecting the out lash. "I am not denying what you say. They were attempting something no one has done before and mistakes were made. Dragons got hurt and lives were lost. *But*," he fixed Flame with a stern look, "that's not the point of this visit. You want to show them you've changed, right?"

Flame nodded sourly.

"Then apologizing will show them you're serious about wanting a second chance. Besides, is there nothing you feel sorry about? Nothing you want to apologize for?"

Flame looked to the floor to hide is ashamed blush. As annoyed as he was with everyone at Jade Academy, he couldn't deny that he had pretty much been an ass the whole time he was there. Sure, his volatile personality had been partly due to the fact that he had

thought, at the time, that his mother didn't want him and that he was a horrible, disfigured freak. But that wasn't an excuse for how horrible he had acted, and Flame cringed at how immature and self-pitying he had been at the time.

"Well now that you mention it," Flame began, "I *miiight* have been a bit of a jerk while I was there."

Starfish's face went deadpan and he raised a skeptical brow in the red dragon's direction.

Flame held the SeaWing's stare until it was too much to handle. "OK, fiiiine," he admitted. "I was a BIG jerk. Now just tell me how to apologize to them so they don't kick me out!"

"I still don't think Flame did anything wrong," Avalanche complained, folding her arms across her chest and blowing a cloud of smoke from her nose.

Starfish stood up and walked around his desk to stand before the mother and son. "This isn't about pinning blame on anyone. The important thing is that we get Flame in to do what he needs to do, which is speak to Stonemover. Besides, I think it would be therapeutic to make amends with Sunny and the other teachers." He turned to face Flame directly with a proud smile. "You're not the same dragon you were when you first walked into this office. *I* know how much you've changed, but now it's time to show the rest of Pyrrhia."

Flame sighed, feeling at itch of self-doubt. "I don't know...what if I just end up making things worse? If you haven't noticed I'm not the best at being friendly."

Flame's head jerked up as Starfish rested a talon on his shoulder. His Healer wore a confident smile that reached his eyes in a tender twinkle. "You'll be fine," Starfish declared with complete surety. "I'll be there to guide you every step of the way. You have nothing to fear."

Although Flame wasn't a fan of touchy-feely conversations (unless they were with Umber), Starf's words put him at ease. Flame took a

breath and returned Starfish's smile.

"OK, let's do this."

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Alright, so all I've got to do is apologize and everything will be fine. Flame repeated that in his head several times to push out all the doubtful thoughts. *Starf knows what he's doing. As long as he is there I'll be OK.*

He took a few deep breaths. It helped to remember he wasn't going to be doing this alone.

Umber and mother will be there also, he reminded himself. *Everyone who cares about me is going to be by my side and will be there to help me.* Flame grimaced, stealing a quick glance at him mother. *Well, so long as my mother doesn't start a fight with someone then I should be fine.*

The scarred dragon was taken out of his thoughts by a gently nudge of wings. He turned to his right and smiled as Umber glided next to him.

"How are you feeling?" the MudWing asked with a sympathetic expression. It was a little hard to make out his voice as the harsh mountain winds were beginning to pick up. It meant they were getting close to their destination. Flame's heart gave another alarmed lurch.

"Scared shitless," Flame admitted with a laugh. Umber's expression softened further.

"Me too," the brown dragon spoke so quietly the wind nearly took the words away before they reached Flame's ears. Before Flame could ask what he meant Starf's voice sounded ahead. Flame couldn't make out what the SeaWing had said but he didn't need to.

Looming ahead the dark mass of Jade Mountain grew larger and larger until it almost took up the entire sky. The colossal shadow seemed to absorb every drop of sunlight that hit it, leaving it a cold husk of a shadow.
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Flame couldn't help but feel like a naïve hero flying right into the villain's lair. Of course, that thought certainly didn't help to calm his nerves.

The four dragons circled around the mountain until they came across a familiar platform leading into an opening along the face of the peak where a crooked sign read 'Welcome Students'. Sitting at the entrance were two figures that were mere specks at this altitude; one was golden and the other a deep blue.

Sunny and Tsunami, Flame noted with a gulp. Even though they had only communicated with Sunny he wasn't surprised to see that the Head Mistress was joining them, although he REAAALLLY wished she hadn't.

He had already been nervous enough dealing with Sunny, and *she* was the nicest person he had ever met (except for Umber).

Tsunami, on the other talon, was probably the dragon he had butted heads with the most while at Jade Academy. Bossy, always had to be right, loud and obnoxious; she had gotten on Flame's nerves from day one and she had made it clear numerous times that he was wearing her patience thin as well...the small amount that she *did* have.

In addition to his own baggage with the SeaWing princess, Flame recoiled at the thought of how his mother would get along with the Head Mistress.

Well, Flame pursed his lips tightly as the group descended. *Nothing to do now but get this shit-show over with.*

At length they landed at the entrance, both parties stuck in a few second of confused limbo, unsure where to go from here. It was Starfish, bless his soul, that was the first to break the ice. He approached the small golden dragon with an enthusiastic smile. "You must be Sunny! It's a pleasure to finally meet you!"

Sunny responded with equal excitement. "Oh my gosh, Starfish! I can't believe I'm meeting you in person! Welcome to our school. I'm so excited to show you around and –"

"Hoooooold up," Tsunami intruded the conversing duo, stepping between them in one confident stride. "We're not here to give a tour. We're here to talk about *him*." Her eyes locked onto Flame in a severely unfriendly manner. Flame's body clenched as orange eyes met blue. Part of him wanted to shrink to the size of a pebble to get away from the harsh stare while another part wanted to tell her to stick that snotty attitude where the sun don't shine.

Fortunately, or maybe unfortunately, his mother stepped in to fill the silence. "Don't you talk to my son like that!" she hissed, towering over the younger SeaWing. "Oh, and by the way, I'm his *mother* and since we're already wasting time with pointless conversation I'd like to make a few comments myself, particularly about how this school is being run."

Tsunami balked, her gills flaring. "You have a problem with how I'm running things?" she asked, although it was not in a tone that suggested she was opened to constructive criticism.

Flame sighed. They had been here less than five minutes and already the air crackled with tension. Thank the Moons Starfish was there to act as the peace-keeper. The brazen Healer stepped between the two bristling females to politely, yet firmly, push them apart.

"Sorry, Head Mistress Tsunami. My guest didn't mean any offense," Starfish said, dipping his head at the skeptical Tsunami.

"I don't need you to speak on my behalf!" Avalanche growled.

"Now is not the best time for this conversation, *Avalanche*," Starfish murmured through gritted teeth.

The red dragoness merely huffed out smoke and rolled her eyes, seemingly exasperated with the slew of morons that surrounded her. Meanwhile Sunny had appeared at Tsunami's side. She was speaking sternly at the SeaWing but Flame couldn't make out what was said.

"Well this is going well," Umber whispered sarcastically into his ear. Flame snorted in agreement. At least they were too busy to focus on

him.

When Flame turned his attention back to the drama he found that his mother and Tsunami had backed off to different sides of the platform while Sunny and Starfish sat in the center exchanging exhausted expressions.

"My apologies about all this," the Healer stated while rubbing his gills awkwardly. "I was, uh, *coerced* into bringing a few unexpected guests."

"Likewise," Sunny replied with sympathy before sliding her eyes towards Tsunami.

"Wait, a *few* guests?" Tsunami asked, clearing missing Sunny's implication. "I only see one. Who else did you bring?"

It didn't take long at all for all eyes to fall on Umber. Sunny and Tsunami cried out the MudWing's name and quickly swarmed him.

"Oh my Moons! Umber! How *are* you! How is Sora?" Sunny asked with heartfelt concern.

"I-I've been fine, Sora's good too. She's doing much better," Umber replied looking a bit uncomfortable. Before he could continue Tsunami had swung an arm around his shoulders.

"Clay and Turtle are gonna be so excited to see you! You have NO idea how worried they've been about you. Not to mention ME!" she shouted, her scales flashing with each yelled word. "I WAS SO WORRIED! But anyway, I think Clay's teaching right now but Turtle should be hanging around somewhere."

Flame tried to smother the spark of jealousy that blossomed in his chest as Umber's face lit up in excitement. Why was he feeling like this? Clay was Umber's brother, of course he'd want to see him. As for Turtle, well, they had been good friends. Nothing more.

It would make sense that Umber would want to spend time with some actually NICE dragons instead of mean, grumpy Flame. What could Flame offer that Umber couldn't find elsewhere?

Flame thoughts screeched to a halt when he looked up to see Umber's eyes on him. Their gazes met and Umber smiled.

The MudWing looked to Tsunami. "Maybe some other time. For now I'd rather just stay with my boyfriend." Umber strode forward and confidently sat beside Flame, entwining their tails.

The looks on the gold and blue dragons faces were priceless.

Sunny's brow was lowered in confusion and her lips kept moving as if she wanted to ask something but didn't know what. Meanwhile Tsunami was gaping at them as if they had just transformed into a four headed goat with chicken wings.

"BOYFRIEND?" the blue dragoness finally bellowed. "OVER MY DEAD BODY. Umber, you can't be serious! You just *wait* until I tell Clay about this –"

"I'd hate to interrupt," Starfish popped in, obviously changing the subject before things got out of talon again, "but I'd really like to get this discussion underway. I don't think I need to remind you why we came here to begin with so if we could get this matter settled sooner than later that would be greatly appreciated." He smiled at them charmingly but his words sobered the group.

Indeed, they didn't need reminding as to why Flame was here.

He had tried to kill Stonemover and now wanted to speak with him.

Flame unconsciously leaned towards Umber as all eyes fell on him. He gulped, waiting for someone to speak. Sunny and Tsunami exchanged looks before the golden dragon cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry, Flame, but you do realize we can't just let you walk down there and see him. We have to make sure, that, well –"

"That it's safe to let you near him," Tsunami finished. Sunny nodded apologetically.

Flame nodded in understanding, although their apprehension about him stung. He knew he deserved it but it still hurt.

"So why do you want to speak with Stonemover anyway?" Tsunami asked, her scales glowing inquisitively. "What's so important that you *have* to go and see him?"

Flame glanced to his right to see Starfish giving him and encouraging nod. Flame took a deep breath.

"I just wanted to apologize to him for, you know, trying to kill him and all." He was going to leave it at that, but the expectant expressions on the teachers' faces indicated they were looking for more of an answer. Awkwardly Flame obliged. "I- I regret doing it. Honestly I do. I don't know what came over me that day – "

But he did know. It had been rage. Dark, burning, suffocating rage that had compelled him to act. A rage that had been growing ever since he had come back from the NightWing's Island. Mutilated, humiliated, and then tossed aside by all those who loved him, he had come to Jade Academy a broken dragon full of hate.

But that's not who he was, at least not anymore.

"Listen," Flame started again, his tone frank, "I was dealing with a lot of issues when I came to the Academy, and I know it's no excuse for what I did, but, well, I wasn't myself at the time. I mean, I'll be the first to admit that I wasn't always the calmest, nicest guy, but after the war I was just full of so much rage and hate – but I'm getting better now." He looked up from the ground to see Sunny and Tsunami listening to him intently. He sighed. If he was going to spill his guts he might as well let it all out. He let his shoulders slump. "I'm just tired of living like this. I just want to move on and let go of the past, so if you could let me go apologize to Stonemover so I can put this miserable experience behind me that would be fucking fantastic."

"Flame!" his mother scolded reflexively.

Flame rolled his eyes. "Sorry, I meant it would be REALLY fantastic." Beside him Umber stifled a laugh.

He returned his gaze to the two females before him. Sunny looked contemplative and sympathetic. Not that he was any good at

reading faces, but if he had to guess he would say the small gold dragon was already convinced. Tsunami, on the other talon, still looked rather skeptical, although much of the aggression had receded into thoughtfulness. Her blue eyes scanned over him as if trying to find the detonation button that would turn this seemingly harmless dragon into a deadly weapon.

"So you're saying you no longer have the urge to kill anyone? Ever?" Tsunami asked.

Flame rubbed his neck, shrugging helplessly. "Uh, well I have my good days and bad days but, in all honesty, I *do* feel terrible about what I did to Stonemover and I never want to feel like that again."

"If my word counts for anything I'd like to say something as well," Starfish suddenly pipped up, approaching to stand behind Flame. "I have been Flame's Soul Healer since he first arrived at the Healing Center. I've gotten to know a lot about him over the past month, working with him to get to the root of his anger and helping him to overcome it. He's made excellent progress and it is my *professional* opinion that he is ready to confront Stonemover. The animus will not be harmed."

"Yeah, Flame's super sweet!" Umber chimed in with a smile. "He helps prepare the meals at the Healing Center AND he's teaching me how to read!"

Flame looked away bashfully at the undeserved praise. He had only really given Umber *one* reading lesson but he was sure there would be more in the future.

The Head Mistress still looked unconvinced.

"Oh come on, Tsunami," Sunny urged. She swished her golden tail impatiently back and forth. "Give him a chance! Can't you see he's making an effort here!"

At that Flame felt a nudge from Starfish followed by a significant stare. He was about to snap at the Healer for distracting him at a time like this, but then he remembered. *OH RIGHT! That amazing apology I'm supposed to give them. Ah crap.*

This was probably the most embarrassing thing he was ever going to do: grovelling at the feet of the Dragonets of Destiny. But, as much as he hated to admit it, he knew, deep deep deep deep deep deep deep deep deep deep DEEP down, that it was the right thing to do. He internally groaned and steeled himself.

"And, erm...it's not just Stonemover who I wanna say sorry to," be began a little reluctantly. "I – *Moons I can't believe I'm saying this* - I also wanted to apologize to *you* guys."

Finally that infuriatingly skeptical glare on the SeaWing was shed, quickly replaced by balking, wide-eyed surprise.

Flame recalled what he and Starf had rehearsed. "Like I said before, I was pretty hateful when I came here and I was a huge ass – er- I mean *jerk*, to you guys and everyone else. I was mean, rude, obnoxious and didn't appreciate the opportunity I was given to come to this school in the first place. I know it's not much but I'd at least like to offer my sincerest apologies and thank you for putting up with me as long as you did." He gracefully bowed his head, hoping Starf would appreciate the dramatic flair. Maybe it would earn him some pity points from the intimidating dragoness before him.

Flame stole a glance up at the Head Mistress, holding his breath in anticipation.

She didn't look surprised anymore, but at least she didn't look defensive either. Her softened eyes regarded him thoughtfully before she released a long sigh through her nose.

"Well that's great and all but how does this prove we can trust you?"

"Are you serious!?" Avalanche shot up, smoke puffing from her mouth. She pushed her way into the circle of dragons to glare down at Tsunami. "What else do you want from him!? He's already said he regretted what he did and apologized to you; just let him in already so we can be done with this!"

Whatever sympathy the blue dragon had formed for his case vanished. She matched the red dragon's fiery glower. "Look, at the

end of the day your son tried to murder someone and no amount of 'I'm sorry's is going to change that. I'm the head of the school and my decision on the matter will decide what happens."

Sunny shot Tsunami a hard look. "*Your* decision?" But the golden dragon's complaint when ignored.

Avalanche wasn't having any of this. "You certainly think highly of yourself, don't you? You think being a princess and a *Dragonet of Destiny* make you something special, huh? Well guess what? You're nothing but a spoiled brat that flaunts her power over others by making their lives miserable."

If Tsunami could spit fire she would have. Instead she released a low growl, her gills pulsing. Instantly Starfish and Umber sprang into action to calm the snarling females while Flame stayed at a safe distance.

"How DARE you!" the blue dragoness snarled. Umber was at her side keeping her from lunging forward, quickly murmuring calming words that were being completely ignored. "I'll have you know I saved Pyrrhia! And what have you done, hmm? What significant thing have you done with YOUR life to warrant respect and praise?"

"How about the fact that I was part of that pathetic group of dragons tasked with the oh-so-simple job of KEEPING YOU MISERABLE WHELPS ALIVE!" Avalanche pushed against Starfish's outstretched talons.

Over the din of the fracas Sunny and Flame met eyes. Flame quickly looked away but that didn't stop Sunny from walking over to him.

"It seems we're the odd one's out," she commented with amusement. The SkyWing nodded in turn, flashing a taut smile. What the hell was he supposed to do *now*? He already apologized, what else was there to say? Starfish was supposed to be handling the conversation, not him.

Sunny observed the scene thoughtfully for several silent moments before flashing a triumphant grin. "I doubt they'll notice if we slip away. Come on, let's talk. Just you and me." She made her way

towards the mouth of the cave with the expectation that he would follow. Flame's confidence faltered.

He didn't want to talk to Sunny alone! By the Moons, what was she going to do to him? Was she going to yell at him for what he did to her father? She didn't come off as the type to attack him but, then again, as he had learned from past experience he was a very attackable person. Flame looked back to Starfish for help but the Healer very much had his talons full.

"B-but, what about – I can't just leave them I – shouldn't we wait?" Flame glanced back and forth between the small female and the mob of arguing dragons.

Sunny sat down at the entrance, waiting for him to catch up. "Don't worry about them. Tsunami and Avalanche won't kill each other; the boys will make sure of that. They'll probably just be arguing for the next hour so we might as well put that time to good use! So come on! We made some changes to the school that I think you'll like!"

Tsunami and Avalanche maiming each other were the least of his concerns. He didn't know WHAT Sunny was up to or what in Pyrrhia she wanted to talk about but the whole situation had a foreboding air. Without his consent Flame's talons remained rooted to the stone floor. Sunny looked back to see what was holding him up and soften her expression. "Hey, it'll be OK. The students should all be in class so we'll have the place to ourselves. I promise you won't have to talk to anybody else."

Flame relaxed a little bit. With all the excitement that had been going on he had nearly forgotten his other fear of running into his old winglet or really ANYBODY who might recognize him.

The small dragoness turned around again and entered the school, this time not waiting for him.

Not really seeing any way out of it, Flame cast one last helpless glance behind him before entering the villain's liar.

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Author's Note:

(Looks at calendar and realizes its almost been a month since I've updated) Sorry for the long wait! I had the flu for a few weeks and that put me behind in a lot of projects ;W;.
Also, I am toying with the idea of Umber meeting with a few dragons from his old winglet in the next but haven't decided yet. Let me know if that's something you guys would like to see!

Chapter 35

"So...how have you been?" Sunny asked with her usual perky tone. Flame tried not to flinch at the jolly sound.

"Fine?" he offered cautiously. She was leading him further into the mountain, past the main atrium and down towards the prey center. The air continued to cool the further in they went.

"And are you enjoying your time at the Healing Center? Is it nice there?"

"Uh, yeah. It's fine."

Sunny shifted her eyes to the side to observe Flame while keeping her head forward. She huffed out a laugh. "You don't have to be so anxious. I don't bite!"

A blush spread over Flame's face. "I- I'm not anxious!" The statement would have been much more convincing had he not flinched as a pebble touched his foot.

"Yeesh! You're acting like the place is going to crumble on top of you at any second!"

As if I would be so lucky, Flame lamented. But alas, he was doomed to continue this painfully awkward conversation with Sunny while they seemingly meandered through the hallways of the mountain.

"Is there a reason we're going towards the prey-center?" He tactfully dodged her questions to ask his own. "I ate before I left so I'm not really in the mood for anything."

Sunny shook her head. "Oh, we're not going to eat. I just think walking around and talking is a lot more fun than sitting in a cramped office with me asking questions like an interrogation. It

makes it more informal I guess."

"Sure," Flame attempted to agree. At least it gave them something to do during the long silences the perforated the conversation.

Abruptly the scent of prey wafted through the tunnel, so pungent it made Flame cough. Yep, they were definitely getting close to the prey-center. A few more steps and they emerged from the tunnel into the open cave of the eating area. Luckily it was void of any students. Only a few roaming cows and chickens were left in the feeding pit looking dazed and confused.

Jeez, I forgot how lame this place was. At least at the Healing Center you can eat cooked food if you want. Looks like they haven't improved too much here.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Flame could see they had added *some* stuff to make the place more organized. Large, circular tables had been carved from the walls to create more social areas and it even looked like they had added some drains on the floor for easier clean up.

So essentially nothing cool. Flame would have personally added a giant fire pit in the center to make it a grill-it-yourself style thing but he wasn't a teacher here so what did he know?

The gold dragon entered the vast chamber and sat down at a round table near the front. She eagerly patted the floor beside her as an invitation for him to join. Flame slinked over, his guard up. What was she doing *now*?

"So," she began.

"So what?" He slouched down at the table, eyes narrowed.

There was a pause.

"You and Umber, huh?"

Flame groaned. *I KNEW she was going to ask about that!*

"What about it?" he snapped. If Tsunami's reaction was anything to

go by, it was obvious that his and Umber's relationship had not been well received by their hosts. The *last* thing he needed right now was for someone to go criticizing something they had NO BUSINESS TALKING ABOUT.

Luckily Sunny seemed to get the hint as she immediately went on the defensive. "Oh, I didn't mean anything by it! I was just surprised to hear Umber say you're his boyfriend. I mean, you guys never really interacted while you were here so it just seems kind of...sudden I guess."

Flame inspected the dragon beside him carefully. Was she just genuinely curious or just trying to get info out of him to gossip about later?

Or was this some sort of test to see if he was worthy to date Umber?

Whatever the reason, Flame wasn't having it. He leaned forward to glare down at the hybrid. "OK, listen here. First off, what happens between me and Umber is none of your business! Secondly, we're - well," Flame rubbed his neck, "we're not *technically* dating yet. We're still taking things kind of slow for now and figuring it all out. Umber's been really cool and patient and sweet this whole time while I've been going through all this shit and I'm just really trying not to mess up my one chance to be with him –" Flame stopped, realizing he had been rambling. He trailed his eyes along the ceiling of the cave to avoid Sunny's knowing grin and cleared his throat. "Uh – where was I going with this – OH RIGHT! And THIRDLY I am NOT going put up with some bullshit lecture about how I'm not good enough for Umber. I know damn well I'm not but that doesn't mean I'm not trying! So if you and everyone else could keep your shitty opinions to yourselves that would be great." Deflated Flame sat back down. His eyes still burned but he felt a weight lifted off his chest.

He didn't regret what he had just done. It had needed to be said; even if it meant offending his host.

To his surprise Sunny didn't seemed phased at all by his proclamation. Instead she beamed, resting her elbows on the table while amusement played on her features. "He must be really

important to you. I don't think I've ever heard you speak like that about *anyone* before."

Flame looked at his talons. "Um, yeah, he's really special to me."

Sunny's smile dropped sadly. "But you're right. Lots of dragons are going to have *opinions* about you and Umber and not all of them will be favourable."

Flame shrugged. "Like I care what the world thinks. I'm just trying to be the best me possible, and not just for Umber but for myself too. That's the whole reason I came back to this shitty school. So I could make amends and start fresh. Once I do that I never have to come back here again."

In the perimeter of his mind Flame realized he was doing a terrible job at the whole 'show everyone you're not a rude asshole anymore' thing. Buy hey; at least he was being honest. He wasn't about to go on some fake spiel about how wonderful a time he had had at Jade Academy. He knew it wasn't Sunny's fault that his experience had sucked, but nothing could change the fact that being in these caverns and caves set him on edge. He had to keep reminding himself to unclench his jaws and stop wringing his talons together.

Sunny frowned. "I... didn't realize how hard it was for you to come back here."

"Yeah, well, like I said, I wasn't in a good place in my life while I was here." Flame crossed his arms and turned away.

Silence dripped between them but Flame made no attempt to break it. He stole a glance at Sunny who was staring at her talons, deep in thought. Finally she sighed.

"I think I owe you an apology."

Flame stared. "Wha – really?"

Sunny nodded. "Everyone knew how miserable you were while you were here, but no one bothered to talk to you or try to understand what was going on. No one offer you help or anything!" She hung her head, her green eyes swollen with regret. "Including me. I guess

I thought you would just get over it on your own. But I was wrong." She lifted her head to look at him with deep compassion. "So I'm sorry about that, Flame. I'm sorry I wasn't there to help you when you needed it."

All that talk between him and Starfish about getting an apology from Sunny and the others had been nothing but wishful thinking. He hadn't actually expected it to happen. He was at a loss for words.

"Uh - It wasn't your fault," he tried to reassure the small gold dragon, although he wasn't sure why. "I was just really messed up at the time. There's nothing you could've really done anyway so - "

"But I at least could have TRIED!" She yelled louder than Flame would have thought possible for someone her size. "We *all* could have tried. We brought all these traumatized dragons into our school and we had no way of helping them. They had just been through a *war* and we expected them to just act like normal students. We should have had some way to reach out to them. We should have *prepared* for this. We should have – "

Sunny's sentence dropped into a huff and the agitated dragon rested her head in her talons. It was obvious she was thinking about what had happened with Sora and what could have been done differently.

In terms of giving reassurance Flame was now *way* over his head so instead he opted once again for the honest route.

"Look, what's done is done. Yeah, there always going be stuff you wished you did differently but that's not going change the past so there's no point obsessing over it. You just gotta move on." He propped his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his knuckles. Surprisingly he was starting to relax a little. Maybe there actually *wasn't* anything malicious about this conversation after all.

Sunny exhaled. "I know. But I'd at least like to *learn* from my mistakes if I can." She glanced up at him quickly then looked away guiltily. "To be honest, I did have a second reason for wanting you and Starfish to come here. I was hoping to speak with your Healer

about maybe making some sort of counselling program here at the school. Do you think he would want to help?"

"Starfish? Oh yeah, he's a sucker for helping dragons and being nice and all that fluffy stuff." Flame laughed. "It would probably make his whole freakin *week* if you asked him."

This made Sunny smile. "That'd be amazing! Of course - hopefully Tsunami doesn't give him a hard time." Sunny covered her mouth and it took Flame a moment to realize she was hiding a laugh. "They didn't exactly hit it off when they met."

Flame snorted in agreement. If anyone could start a squabble it was Tsunami. "Well if there *is* any trouble I could probably get Zephyr to help instead."

Sunny blinked several times rapidly, balking in surprise. "Wait... you know *Zephyr*? The *Matron* of the Healing Center? Do you really think you could speak to her for me?"

At that point Flame realized that maybe Sunny didn't quite understand just how informal the Healing Center was. Sure, Zephyr was close to Queen Ruby and was essentially in command of running the whole facility, but she also ate her meals and roamed the gardens alongside all the other patients. In fact, on one of the rare mornings that Flame had woken in time for breakfast he had seen her stuff several croissants into her mouth before sitting at a table with several other Soul Healers, all of them joking and talking together like friends. All in all he was pretty sure he could just go up and talk to her.

It also helped that he knew Sora and Jet. In the event that he couldn't speak to the SkyWing Healer then he was sure one of his friends could. Flame suppressed a laugh. He still couldn't get over the fact that he actually had *friends* now.

Sunny's desperate stare brought him back. Trying to look cool he nonchalantly inspected his talons. "I have connections. I could talk to her about the idea if you wanted me to."

The small dragon clasped her talons together and sprung up. "OH

THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU!" She bounced around like a sunbeam come to life. After a few moments she finally calmed down and approached the SkyWing to rest her talon on-top of his. "Thank you, Flame. I really appreciate this."

He shrugged. "It's nothing."

The dragoness observed him for several heartbeats, searching into his eyes as if looking for something. Flame tried not to squirm under her gaze and only relaxed once Sunny eased off with a smile, obviously having found what she was looking for. Immediately she hopped up and headed back towards the tunnel. "Come on!" She encouraged him to follow with a swish of her tail.

Groaning, Flame stood up and followed at a slower pace. "*Now* where are we going?"

"I'm going to take you to my father."

Flame stumbled in his steps. "R-right now?"

She twisted her neck to look at him from behind. "Is that OK? I thought he *wanted* to speak with him."

"I do! It's just – well I thought there would be more to it than that. Like, some sort of moral test or an oath of non-violence ...or ...something."

Sunny giggled, "And oath of non-violence? What kind of school do you think we run here?"

Flame blushed. *OK, maybe I've been reading too many graphicolls.*

"Well I don't know!" He snapped defensively. "I just thought it was gonna be harder than this."

They returned to the antechamber, passing the various hallways and headed towards the part of the school that was off limits to students, where the rocks were more unstable and dragons rarely treaded. Sunny lead him along a quiet path that ended abruptly into a jagged wound in the stone. This was officially where the school ended and the mountain began. Gaping darkness yawned before the

pair like thick soot, swallowing the light that filtered from the skylights behind them. Sunny entered the tunnel first without as much as a blink. Flame stumbled behind her. He knew this path well. It traversed all the way to the other side of the mountain where Stonemover's lair was found. He gulped.

"Honestly, I was already pretty sure you'd be fine to talk with my father," Sunny spoke. Her voice was amplified by the cold stone that brushed against their wings. She breathed a plumb of fire as the last inkling of light dripped away. "I just wanted to talk with you one on one to make sure you were genuine. I have a good intuition when it comes to other dragons and I know you're sorry for what you did."

Flame was hardly listening. The further down they went the heavier his talons became to the point where it felt as if he was walking through a field of thick mud. His heart was pounding so hard he wondered if it would shake the mountain. Beads of sweat squeezed between the scales of his forehead to rest on his brow.

In all the graphicolls he had read in his life, the hero always boldly leapt towards their destiny, no matter what powerful villain or world-destroying obstacle was in their way. Risking life and limb they went forth, always emerging triumphant.

When Flame had first arrived he had thought of himself as hero on his own journey of redemption, but now he wasn't so sure. A hero wouldn't be this scared. A hero wouldn't want to run away.

Flame licked his dry lips. "Does he – does he want to see me? Is he afraid of me?"

"He's..." Sunny sighed. "I don't really know how he feels about all this to be honest. At first he seemed scared but then he was just apathetic about it. Either way, I think he needs to have this conversation just as much as you do."

"You think so?"

"Yes." The surety of her voice was unwavering.

Flame digested this information. He didn't doubt for a second that

Stonemover could be apathetic about most things. Flame recalled the many agonizingly slow hours he had spent by the NightWing's side in an attempt to rouse any emotion or sympathy from the old dragon. On good days he would get a sigh or two. On bad days just a blank stare.

But did the animus *really* not care that Flame was returning? Was he *that* much of an empty shell that not even a visit from his almost-murderer could stir any kind of reaction?

As they moved deeper into the mountain time seemed to slow. The second ticked by at the speed of the dripping stalactites. Everything moved at glacial pace in a way that was both calming and irritating to Flame. It helped subdue his racing thoughts but it put his nerves on edge. Had time stopped? Would they ever get to their destination?

After wandering for what felt like *a billion* eternities the tunnel finally widened up into humid cavern that stank of stagnant water and moss. Straight ahead was an oval-shaped crevice that looked hastily made and not intended for visitors. Deep firelight poured out of the opening in a way that reminded Flame of the glowing eyes of a cat at night.

Briefly a shadowed obstructed the firelight as something massive within took a deep breath.

Flame's stomach flipped.

"You OK?" Sunny asked, scooting closer to him with concern.

"Fine," he muttered while dread filled him to the brim. In a flashing moment of weakness he considered turning back but quickly smothered the feeling.

He had been running from this guilt for so long. Now it was time to do something right for once in his damn life. Flame inhaled deeply. He thought of Umber, his mother, and Starfish. All the advice and support they had given him.

He reminded himself why he needed to do this. He had to set things

right if he ever wanted to move on. He needed closure. Redemption.

There was no turning back now.

"OK," he exhaled. "I'm ready."

"Good luck," the golden dragon murmured as Flame passed. "I'll be out here if you need me."

Without another word the SkyWing crossed the cavern and stepped into Stonemover's lair.

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Umber was the first to notice something was amiss.

"Wait...where's Flame?"

Abruptly the bickering came to a halt as Avalanche, Tsunami, and Starfish looked to Umber before glancing around.

"Sunny's gone too!" Tsunami exclaimed while her eyes scanned the platform for her gold companion. With a harrumphing scowl she crossed her arms. "I *knew* she was going to try something like this! She's been trying to get rid of me all day!"

"Too bad it didn't work," Avalanche mumbled under her breath with every intention for Tsunami to hear it.

The SeaWing female puffed up, her gills flaring.

"Enough you two!" Starfish suddenly snapped. He stood between the females, an impenetrable wall of annoyance and exasperation. "It's no wonder they left! We've been acting like a squabbling pack of sea-monkeys! We should be ashamed at how unprofessional we've been."

Tsunami huffed and Avalanche rolled her eyes, but Umber couldn't help but notice the guilty slouch of their backs. Umber hung his head as well.

Even though he hadn't been a participant in the fighting he had still
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ditched Flame after promising to be at his side the whole time. Some boyfriend he was turning out to be.

Starfish sighed, rubbing his temples. "There's nothing to do now but wait here until they return."

"For *you* maybe," Tsunami snorted. "But *I'm* the Head Master. I've got things to do, places to be, students to instruct, winglets to manage." Her eyes locked on Umber and she smiled wickedly. "In fact, there's a specific *Jade* winglet I think I'd like to pay a visit to."

Without so much as a farewell-nod to Avalanche and Starfish, Tsunami leapt towards the entrance. "Let's go, Umber!"

Umber blinked in surprise. Awkwardly he looked back towards Starfish and Avalanche. "But – shouldn't I stay here? In case Flame comes back?"

He already felt terrible as it was but it would be even *worse* if Flame came back to find Umber had left yet again. The MudWing felt a talon rest on his shoulder and he whipped around to see Starfish. The SeaWing stared down at him with an encouraging smile.

"It's alright, Umber. Go see your friends. I suspect Flame won't be back for a while."

"But –"

"He's in good talons with Sunny," he went on. "She'll take care of him." His smiled faltered as he gazed serenely at the mountain. "Besides, there's not much we could have done anyway. As much as I wanted to help Flame get through this, deep down I think I knew this was something he had to do alone."

Umber cocked his head to the side, considering the SeaWing's words. Growing up with his sibs he had come to understand that support was always close by, whether it was for battle or even just someone to lean on. The idea that there were things in this world that had to be faced alone astonished him. Was such a thing possible?

His thoughts went back to Sora. For so long he had tried to help her

carry her burden of guilt before realizing it was pointless. Sora's actions had been her own and it was her responsibility to accept the consequences. As hard as he might try, Umber would never be able to earn redemption for her. That was up to her to do and based on the conversation he had had with her this morning she had seemed to have already come to that realization.

With a jolt Umber came to a realization himself that, in a way, he had been treating Flame like he had Sora: trying to protect him, acting as an emotional crutch to prevent the full impact of guilt and grief from crippling him.

But crutches are only supposed to be temporary.

Maybe Starfish was right. Maybe there *were* some things that had to be faced alone.

But if Umber was being honest with himself, Flame wasn't the only reason he wanted to stay back and wait here. He was still cowering at the idea of reuniting with his friends only to discover they had forgotten about him.

He imagined them sitting in a circle, laughing at inside jokes, jostling their wings together, and exchanging familiar glances in the way that good friends did. In these visions Umber was the one sitting just outside the ring of dragons, desperately trying to maneuver himself into the circle without being too obvious about it, all while trying to listen to a story he hadn't been there for or laugh at a joke he didn't get.

It painted a pretty pathetic picture.

"Well Umber, you coming?"

The brown dragon looked up to see the Tsunami still waiting for him in the mouth of the mountain. He took in a deep breath, letting the crisp air fill his lungs.

Even with all the insecurities rattling around his chest, he couldn't ignore how desperately he wanted to see his friends again.

Turtle's relaxed smile, Moonwatcher's calming aura, Kinkajou's

endless energy, Winter's scowling brows, and Qibli's...well, everything about Qibli he missed. Even though he had once had a crush on the SandWing he was confident those feelings had ebbed away long ago, but that didn't stop him from missing his goofy friend.

Besides, if Flame could face Stonemover alone then he should be able to have one little reunion with his old Winglet.

Feeling both an excited and anxious buzz pulse through him Umber came to a decision. He turned around to give Starfish one last questioning glance, almost feeling the need to ask permission to leave. With bright eyes Starfish nodded his wordless consent.

Smiling, Umber looked back to Tsunami. "Yeah, I'm coming."

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Hello friends! I hope you enjoyed this chapter! About a few weeks ago I had intended for this story to end at 35 chapters, but now with the addition of Umber's little reunion the story length has been extended. I'm a little nervous to be writing for so many major canon characters but I'll try my best to portray them accurately!
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Chapter 36

Tsunami cheerfully ushered him through the hallways and antechambers of the mountain. The sudden change from sitting in the warm sun to entering the cool, shaded tunnels sent a brief chill along Umber's scales. Or maybe that was just his nerves.

"This way!" the SeaWing spoke without looking back, her scales instinctively glowing in the dim environment. "I'm pretty sure the Jade Winglet has a free period right now, so I'd bet my best scale that they're in the library."

Umber politely nodded, although the gesture was lost on Tsunami who wasn't even looking at him. As they passed through the archway and the scent of parchment filled his lungs, vivid memories flashed in Umber's mind of entering this place for the first time with his sister. His heart ached at how bitter-sweet those moments had been.

Not far from the entrance Umber could see the librarian's desk nestled among piles of returned scrolls and at its helm was the familiar NightWing librarian. While his eyes were unfocused and glassy, his brow was furrowed in concentration as his talons danced nimbly over a stone tablet etched with thick lettering.

"Starflight!" Tsunami called and walked over to the desk. Starflight perked to attention and gently set down the item in his talons.

"Hey!" he greeted before his face skewed in confusion. "What are you doing here? Didn't you and Sunny have some secret 'official' business to take care this afternoon that apparently was so top secret that you couldn't even tell me?"

Umber raised a brow. *Hmm, I guess they decided to keep Flame's visit a secret from the others. Probably for the best.*

"Sunny's dealing with that now," Tsunami clarified with a wave of

her talon. "As for me, I'm taking Umber here to visit his old Winglet!"

"Hey, Starflight," Umber softly made his presence known.

Starflight's whole face lifted into a smile. "I knew I heard another set of talons! Umber, it's such a relief to hear your voice!" The NightWing reached a talon out and Umber took it in his own. "Is Sora here as well?"

"Um, no. She stayed back at the Healing Center."

Starflight retracted his talons, his expression pensive. "Healing Center? Is that the one in the Sky Kingdom?"

Umber nodded before remembering the librarian couldn't see him. "Erm, yeah! How'd you know about it? Almost everyone I talk to outside the Sky Kingdom has no idea what it is."

Starflight beamed in that way that indicated he was going to go on some educational spiel. "Fatespeaker read an article about it to me from the weekly news-parchment that I get delivered from the Sky Kingdom. I'm trying to get news-parchments from all the tribes if possible and keep them here in the library in an archive. That way everyone can stay up-to-date with what's happening in their tribes but also future students can –"

"Not that this isn't *fascinating*," Tsunami interrupted, her chin resting on the lip of the desk in boredom, "but I'd like for Umber to meet with his friends BEFORE the sun goes down, thanks."

Starflight scowled in her general direction but obliged. "Fine. Moon came in earlier today to book one of the study rooms for this afternoon. If my memory is correct then they should be in there now. They specifically asked for the stone room, so that's where you'll find them."

"Thanks, Starflight!" The SeaWing bounced up and bounded towards the far end of the library.

"Bye!" Umber called, feeling the need to indicate they were leaving. The NightWing gave a little wave farewell before returning to

whatever he had been doing before they arrived.

Umber trailed after the SeaWing princess as she expertly navigated the maze of shelves and cushioned seats until they reached a series of miniature archways carved into the rock at the edge of the library. Each lead to a carved out alcove set up for group studying, although only one was in use right now.

With a wave of her wing, Tsunami urged Umber forward to take a look. He swallowed and inched forward, timidly peeking his head past the door frame to peer inside.

It was a simple room with no wooden furnishings. Just pillows and a small window at the back that allowed the fresh, alpine-blue sky to pour in, filling the room with crisp light. Sitting at a stone table was a row of familiar dragons that brought a gleeful smile to the MudWing's face.

His eyes went first to the hefty shape of Turtle. The SeaWing Prince was leaning over the table, his brows drawn together in rapt concentration while his ink-soaked talons scribbled away on a sheet of parchment. To his right Moonwatcher lazily scanned a scroll, stopping every so often to jot something into a notebook. On the other side of Moon Kinkajou sat constructing a castle with pencils and erasers, nudging the NightWing triumphantly every time she was able to fit another pencil in without everything collapsing. And at the very end of the table was an empty pillow before a pile of scattered notes. Was there someone missing or was that just Kinkajou's stuff?

He smothered his disappointment that Qibli wasn't there.

Hoping that maybe the SandWing was just hiding in the corner or something, Umber poked his head in further. He didn't find Qibli, but he *did* find out why, out of all the cozy nooks in the library to choose from, his old Winglet had chosen to study in a *stone* room. With her sizzling neck stretch forward towards a scroll placed at a safe, un-burnable distance was the scorn of the Sky Kingdom: Peril. The stone beneath her glowed red and her presence was enough to heat the small room like a furnace. With a pang Umber realized she must be the replacement SkyWing for Carnelian and he felt a little

bad for being so scared of her.

He had been assured by Clay numerous times that she was harmless...so long as you didn't touch her. Still, it jarred him to see her there so casually among his friends, but she appeared to be fitting in just fine. None of them spoke because there was no need. The silence between them was comforting, like the feeling of a familiar bed that has been worn down to fit your shape. They were simply enjoying each other's company.

For a moment Umber's mind was jolted back in time to the day he had first met them all. He cringed slightly at how hard he had tried to impress them, acting like Clay thinking it would make him seem funny and likable. Then again, they had all been pretty awkward. A bunch of misfit dragonets, timid and afraid of each other. But now they seemed – well, the best word Umber could think of was *aged*.

At a first glance they looked the same, but there was a shadow behind their eyes that had replaced that wide-eyed openness he had seen on that first day. Having fought in the war himself, Umber was no stranger to seeing the bright faces of young dragons turn cold as icy steel hardened behind their gazes, but this wasn't the case for his friends. They simply seemed... matured.

Umber backed away from the entrance, feeling like an intruder. In a way it was like he was meeting them for the first time all over again. Nervous butterflies somersaulted in his stomach.

"M-maybe I should come back later. When they're not so busy."

"Too late! This is happening!" Tsunami chirped. Umber's head was whipped back as the SeaWing forcefully pushed him through the entrance. "Everybody stop what you're doing and look who it is! IT'S UMBER!"

Tsunami's booming voice made the whole Winglet jump a foot off their seats, but once they saw the small brown shape beside her their faces lit up. Umber waved timidly.

Instantly the room became chaos. Papers and pencils went flying as his friends raced to greet him all while Tsunami smugly slipped

away.

Turtle was the first to reach him and encased the MudWing in glowing wings that smelled of the sea. "I can't believe you're here! I missed you so much!" In that moment all of Umber's anxieties melted away and he returned Turtle's hug tightly.

Before he knew it he was toppled over as his friends tackled him to the ground in a pile of wings, limbs, and tails.

"OH MY GOSH, UMBER!" Kinkajou shouted in his ear and a shimmer of pink scales appeared before his face.

"Hey, Kinkajou. Good to see you!" he grunted out. The weight of all the bodies on top of him was making breathing a little hard.

Soon the dog-pile dissipated and he was hauled to his feet by Moon and Turtle.

"We were so worried about you and Sora! What happened after you left? Where did you go?" Moon exclaimed. Her brows were knitted with concern, an expression she had worn frequently in the past as if she had been in a state of constant worry. Now that didn't seem to be the case. Maybe it was how she held herself. How she didn't keep flicking her eyes away every time they met another's. She was less skittish now and more confident.

Almost as if she had heard the compliment Moon turned away, blushing slightly. Before Umber could dwell on it Kinkajou was shaking him by the shoulders. "You have to tell us *everything* that happened! Leave NO detail out!"

Umber rubbed the back of his neck and grimaced. "Fine, but it's probably going to be really boring compared to what *you* guys did. I mean, you guys defeated *Darkstalker*. How cool is that!"

His friends groaned and rolled their eyes like it was some sort of embarrassing tale.

"Oh come on," Umber chided. "If I tell you my story will you tell me how you took down Darkstalker? Pretty please?"

"It's not *that* great of a story," Turtle leaned back and shrugged. "Besides, Kinkajou was the one who landed the final blow."

The RainWing's scales shifted to rose-pink with shots of yellow. She flicked her talon nonchalantly. "You can read about it once I publish my memoirs."

"Uh, excuse me, am I missing something here?" Peril, still sitting in the corner, spoke up. "Who are *you* supposed to be?" She inspected Umber with a mixture of mild displeasure and annoyance.

"Oop. Sorry, Peril. This is Umber. He was in our Winglet before the...uh, before you were," Turtle answered. It didn't pass Umber's notice that his friend had tactfully avoided saying 'before the explosion'.

Peril still didn't look impressed.

"He's also Clay's brother."

That earned a reaction. The SkyWing stood up on long legs looking flustered. "Oh! Of course, yes. I definitely knew that. I guess that makes you my brother now too or something, so, uh, hooray?"

Umber looked to his friends for clarification but they wore the exact same expressions of confusion. He turned to Peril, choosing his words carefully to avoid offending the living inferno. "Um, that's nice but... how are we related?"

"Through Clay," she stated as if it were obvious before her eyebrows drew together in thought. "Wait, no. I'm not *related* to Clay, I'm just dating him. Ha, that would be super gross if we were related and dating. Anyway, I think that makes us in-laws or something...or does that only happen after marriage?"

"Uh..." Umber blinked twice.

"Huh...maybe I should have mentioned the dating thing first. OK, let me try this again!"

Peril turned her back to them, took a breath, and turned around. "Hi, I'm Peril. I'm dating your brother and have deadly fire-scales

that incinerate everything I touch." She gave him a terrifying smile. "And I'm your new sister!"

"Oh...nice to meet you. Welcome to the family!" Reflexively Umber extended his talons for a shake but quickly retracted it. No touching.

So Clay has a girlfriend now! Umber tucked that information away in his brain just as an amusing thought crossed his mind. *I guess we both have a thing for crazy SkyWings.*

"Don't worry," Turtle whispered. "She's not as dangerous as everybody says."

"Easy for YOU to say Mr. Indestructible-scales!" Kinkajou gave Turtle a playful shove, forcing him to splay his wings out for balance. Umber furrowed his brow.

"Indestructible scales? What's that all about?"

Awkward glances went around the room.

"I guess you weren't around for the big reveal." Turtle rubbed his gills. "I'm kinda sorta an...animus."

Umber's whole face expanded in surprise. "NO *WAY*! ARE YOU SERIOUS? THAT'S INCREDIBLE!" Amazement pumped through his muscles making him bounce. "So you really have indestructible scales? Did you use them to fight Darkstalker? OH! Does that mean nothing can hurt you? Ever?"

"Oh yeah, he's completely damage proof," Peril commented, sauntering over while giving a wide berth to all the flammable objects on the table. "Watch this."

Umber assumed she was about to use her fire-scales to illustrate the indestructibleness of Turtle's scales, however, it came as a surprise to everyone when instead she picked up a fist-sized rock and chucked it right at the SeaWing's head.

It hit with a loud *thunk* that sent Turtle staggering.

"Peril!" he shouted, more in shock than anger, rubbing his temple.

"What? It didn't hurt, did it?"

"Well, no...but at least WARN me next time!"

Moon and Umber covered their mouths to hide their laughs while Kinkajou let out an unrestrained cackle. The RainWing clutched her side and leaned against Umber.

"It's so great to have you back. Qibli's going to lose his mind when he sees you!" Kinkajou said.

Umber's heart did a triple flip. He couldn't hide the excitement from his voice. "He's here?" He looked around despite already knowing the SandWing wasn't in the room.

"He spends a lot of time with Queen Thorn now, but he still comes back every once in a while," Moon answered.

"Like a part-time student sort of thing," Turtle added on. The idea intrigued Umber. Maybe they'd let him go to school part-time too! Then he'd be able to see his friends more without completely leaving Sora and Flame behind at the Healing Center. He'd maybe talk to Clay about it later.

"So is Qibli here *today*?"

"Yep!" Moon confirmed. "He just went to grab a scroll but he'll be back soon."

"What about Winter? Is he here too?"

Moon's smile dropped and she shook her head sadly. "No, the whole issue with Darkstalker was hard on him. I think he needed a break."

Peril snorted out a cloud of black smoke. "As whiney and grouchy as he is, you can't really blame him. First Darkstalker nearly wiped out his tribe with a plague and THEN his tribe almost went to war with an army of magically enhanced NightWings."

Umber made a choked, gasping sound. "WHAT!?" he managed to

spit out. How had he not heard about this? Two tribes going to war? A *plague*?! Sure, he had had his own problems to deal with, but these were the sorts of global events you at least heard about by word of mouth. He clutched his head in disbelief. "I feel like I've had my head in the mud for the past month! Is Winter OK?"

His NightWing friend patted his back in soothing circles. "He's fine, Umber. In fact, he's started a Scavenger research project with the Talons of Peace." She tilted her head towards her RainWing companion. "Kinkajou even visits him sometimes to help."

The bright yellow dragon nodded. "Yeah! He really loves those little things. Personally I think I'll stick with sloths but, hey, I don't judge."

Umber shook his head, letting the news sink in. "Wow, there's so much stuff that happened while I was gone."

Turtle sidled up next to him and extended a friendly wing. The SeaWing's presence sent calming waves ebbing into his tight chest. "Hey, no worries. We'll fill you in."

"Including how you defeated Darkstalker?" Umber asked with a sidelong glance.

Next to him Kinkajou released a pretend, reluctant sigh. "Fiiiine. If you insist then I GUESS we'll tell you about all our heroic deeds."

"More like *your* heroic deeds," Turtle said to the RainWing. "All I did was get hit by a few boulders and enchant a stick."

"An incredibly useful stick!" Kinkajou stomped her foot. "And those boulders weren't anything to sneeze at either!"

The brown dragon released a small laugh and nudged his SeaWing friend. "Well *I* think you're a hero."

Turtle blushed and bashfully kicked a nearby stone. Probably the same Peril had thrown. "Aww, you're just being nice." He gently punched Umber's arm.

The MudWing grinned ear to ear. It was great to be with his friends

again. "I can't wait to hear this story! Honestly, I bet it would make for a great graphicoll series!"

The casual chattering that had filled the room dropped like a stone. His friends looked at him with confusion.

"What's a *graphicoll*?" Peril lips curled back as she pronounced the strange word.

"Aren't they those illustrated scroll things?" a new voice, smooth as silk and as playful as a summer's breeze, answered from the entrance. "Also why are we all standing in a circle now? Did I miss something or – wait, is that who I think it is?"

Umber's spine tingled as he felt the warmth of familiar scales radiating into his skin.

"Umber?" the voice cautiously asked as if afraid to be disappointed.

The MudWing spun around to see a familiar scarred muzzle speckled with freckles. Qibli stared in astonishment before grinning as wide as the sky. "UMBER!"

Suddenly Umber was lifted off the ground as warm arms wrapped around him, but the SandWing had underestimated Umber's weight and the two fell backwards onto the floor. It didn't stop either of them from laughing, their hoots echoing all over the library, earning them more than a few disapproving glares.

"Qibli!" Kinkajou scolded and helped the giggling males up. "Could you NOT suplex Umber on sight? I know you've always wanted to be a pro-wrestler but it's just not polite!"

"Oh no, my secret dreams of becoming a wrestler have been revealed. How *embarrassing*," he lamented, sending Umber a wink. Mischief blazed in his black eyes like wild-fire. "Let's try again."

The SandWing leaned down and gave Umber a more civilized hug, pulling the smaller dragon tight to his chest. Umber's heart thundered beneath his ribs and he wrapped his arms around Qibli's neck in return. Qibli's scent was turning his brain to honey, but just before he was lost to the sensation, an image of Flame flashed in his

mind. In the image the SkyWing was smiling warmly down at Umber. The MudWing couldn't remember where it had been or when, but the vision was so vivid it instantly jarred him out of his rose-tinted stupor.

Croc-spit, he cursed himself. What was he doing?! Acting like a love-struck idiot, that's what!

OK, so maybe he still had *some* feelings for Qibli. It had been easy to toss those notions aside before, but now that he was face to face with the SandWing they had returned with a vengeance.

Shame and guilt collided with the longing inside of him, making for a bitter taste. Some boyfriend *he* was!

"I'm so glad you're here!" Qibli released Umber, holding him at arm's length. "When did you get here? Did you fly right from the Mud Kingdom? How have you been? How's Sora? Ah, sorry. You've probably been asked these questions a hundred times already."

Under the SandWing's gaze Umber felt like his mouth was full of mud and his tongue a tangle of knots. *Snap out of it, Umber! You have a boyfriend! Whatever feelings you had for Qibli was just a silly crush. Flame is so much* more *than that.*

His thoughts went back to the lithe SkyWing: the way his red scales glowed in candlelight, the shy smile he gave Umber when their eyes met, how perfectly their mouths fit together when they kissed...

And how he always tasted a little bit like cookies or some other dessert.

Slowly Umber's fluttering heart stilled and his tongue straightened out, but he had been a beat too late in his answer. Kinkajou had already stepped in to fill the gap.

"Yeah, but he never actually got around to *answering* them. In fact, we were just going to fill him in on all our most recent adventures."

Qibli smiled. "Do you mean the time we defeated Darkstalker or that time yesterday when we thought Turtle had disappeared and spent an hour looking for him just to find out he had fallen asleep

in the underground pool again."

Turtle blushed again as his friends razzed him with nudges and giggles. Umber laughed as well. The heavy feeling in his chest from being near Qibli was receding into nothing. Every time it came back he thought of Flame and the sensation evaporated. Finally, confident he wouldn't trip over his own words, Umber spoke up. "Both stories sound great, but I was hoping to hear the Darkstalker one first please."

"Of course!" Qibli said, wrapping a wing around the MudWing. Umber stiffened. *Think of Flame think of Flame think of Flame!*

The panicked thinking worked and his body relaxed...although Moon was giving him some strange looks. Maybe she had seen him tense up?

"Uh, before we do that," Moon's quiet voice drew everyone's attention, "I think we have some explaining to do. Turtle, would you give Umber one of your skyfire stones please?"

"Yeah, sure!" The SeaWing went to his armband (which already had several bald spots that Umber assumed had once housed gems) and removed a tiny black stone. He dropped it into Umber's waiting talons.

"Oh, uh, thanks I guess." Umber inspected the stone with care. It had been polished to a shine despite being uneven and jagged. "Does this mean I'm part of your club now?" he half-joked.

"It means we trust you," the NightWing spoke. Something in her voice made Umber pause.

"And what exactly are you trusting me with?" Suddenly the stone seemed a lot heavier in his palm.

"With the truth," she responded solemnly.

"Moon, are you sure about this?" Qibli asked. He gave a meek smile to the MudWing beneath his wing. "Not that we don't trust you. Of course we do – it's just that there are certain things about us, er, or rather, about specific individuals," his eyes flickered to Moon, "that

can be a little hard to swallow, so to speak."

Umber masked the sting of Qibli's distrust with a concerned frown. "Oh, well I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable."

"It's fine, Umber. I trust you and I want you to know the truth," Moon assured before sighing deeply and looking around the room at each of the faces that filled the space. "You'd better sit down. We have a lot of stuff to cover."

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Over the course of the afternoon Umber was brought up to speed with everything that had happened since he had fled with Sora, and they didn't leave anything out. He leaned about Moon's prophecy that had started the whole event, Winter's journey to save his brother, Peril's trickster father that had betrayed her, Turtle's battle with Anemone and finally it ended with Kinkajou's clever ruse that defeated the great NightWing animus. Everyone took turns telling their part of the story while others piped in every once in a while if they had something to add.

By the time they finished the pastel blue sky had become the rusty gold of late afternoon. Umber sat with his talons clasped together around the skyfire. It felt like he had been thrown into an ocean of information with weights tied around his ankles. All he could do was keep nodding his head to at least make it look like his mind hadn't exploded as they continued to pile more on.

When finally everything was said and done the group of dragons fixed their eyes on Umber, waiting for his reaction. The MudWing blink and took a breath. "Wow."

The utterly flabbergasted tone by which he spoke made everyone chuckled.

"I know. It's a lot to take in." Turtle patted his arm. "I was even *there* for most of it and half the time I wonder if I just dreamed it all up. Some sort of stress induced illusion."

Qibli nudged him in the side and winked. "Well you wanted the
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whole story, right? So what was your favourite part? Was it how my quick thinking stopped the war between two tribes? Because that's *my* favourite part."

Peril crossed her arms, unimpressed. "And then immediately afterwards you got your tailed kicked by Darkstalker and had to be saved by Kinkajou."

"Shhhh, that's not important," the SandWing insisted.

Umber weakly shook his head. "It was all fantastic! You guys are so amazing, I can't believe you did all that stuff!" This earned him a pleased look from everyone, although Qibli pretended to be offended to make Moon laugh.

The MudWing propped his chin atop his knuckles to face the NightWing. "So can you *really* read minds and predict the future? Just like the legends say?"

Moon shrugged timidly. "I guess so."

Umber nodded in wide-eyed excitement before a sudden thought dropped on his head like a stone. "Wait...does that mean you were listening to my thoughts when I got here."

Her head sunk. "I was trying not to, but some things did slip through."

He gulped. "Like what kinds of things?"

Moon blushed and looked away. Umber's stomach danced nervously. "Oh...nothing important."

"OK, OK, enough with all this boring stuff about saving the world," Kinkajou butt in. "I want to hear what's new with you," she pointed a talon at his snout before booping it.

A chorus of agreements rang around, well, except from Peril who had quietly gone back to her corner to read her scroll. Umber couldn't blame her, they hardly knew each other.

In a way he was grateful to have one less person bombarding him

with questions.

"Did you go right to the Mud Kingdom after you fled here?"

"What is Sora doing now?"

"Did you get in trouble?"

"Where are you guys living?"

Now it was time for Umber to shrink away bashfully.

"Everybody give him some space!" Qibli stood up and conducted the group. "One person at a time AND," his eyes pinned Kinkajou, "one *question* at a time."

The RainWing turned a miffed shade of orange and stuck her tongue out at him, but that was all the resistance she gave.

Hesitantly Turtle raised his talon in the air, obviously confused as to how they should be doing this. Qibli tipped his snout in the air and, in his best Webs voice, spoke, "Yes, you in the front. What's your question?"

"Me? Oh, OK. Well maybe Umber should just tell us the story start to finish, just like we did. That'd probably be easiest."

"Well, pupil Umber? Do you agree to these terms?" Qibli continued with his Web's impersonation.

"Sure, *professor* Qibli. That'd be fine." Umber swiped his talon at the cheeky SandWing but Qibli dodged out of the way last minute while laughing.

Luckily Umber's story took WAY less time to tell. His friends took the most interest when he mentioned the Healing Center so he went to great lengths to describe the place as best he could. He answered Turtle's questions about the cafeteria menu, Kinkajou's quires about the different activities, Qibli's concerns about infrastructure, and, finally, Moon's interest in the Soul Healers.

"Tell me more about the Healers!" she implored, her green eyes

sparkling. "What kinds of therapies do they use? I once read a scroll on mental health but it had hardly anything in it." Her mouth dropped into a frustrated frown.

Umber scratched his cheek while thinking. "Um...I think it depends on the patient, but I know Sora does a lot of visualization and calming techniques buuuuut I'm not sure how it works exactly." He dipped his head apologetically. "Sorry, I'm not the best person to answer this stuff. Flame or Sora would probably give you a better answer."

An uncomfortable jolt passed along his friends. Shared expressions of unease were etched on their faces, but it wasn't until Peril spoke up did Umber realize what was wrong.

"You mean that angry scarred guy who tried to kill Stonemover?!" She curled her lips back to reveal fangs. "They actually let him stay at that healing place?"

"Better there than here!" Kinkajou voiced. "I remember one time in the prey-center he grabbed a grapefruit right out of my talon. When I yelled at him he nearly burned my tail off!"

"As much as I hate to say it, he *was* pretty terrible," Turtle rubbed the back of his neck regretfully.

Umber winced. He wasn't going to pretend his friends were wrong, but he did feel the need to defend Flame's development.

"He's made a lot of progress since he's been at the Healing Center!" Surprised eyes locked on Umber who wilted slightly. Still, he pressed on. "Once you get to know him he's actually really sweet."

Surprise turned to disbelief then to shock.

"Wait...are you actually *friends* with him?" Qibli stared him down.

Umber had certainly stirred the crocodile nest now. There was nothing to do now but give them the honest truth. "Yeah, I am his friend..." Umber looked at his feet, trying hard not to blush. It didn't work. "...and more."

Kinkajou, whose scales swirled with deep greens, oranges, and pale blues, spoke up. "*More*? What does *that* mean?"

No going back now. "It means we're, uh, sort of dating."

Everyone in the room hushed. Even Peril was gawking with interest now, her icy eyes pinning him.

"*DATING*!" Qibli bellowed. "Umber, you can't be serious! He's a murderer with serious anger issues!"

"The evidence is pretty much against his favour. I was there when Darkstalker locked him away for trying to kill Stonemover. I'm sorry," Turtle apologized as if regretting that those were the facts.

"You looked inside his head once," the freckled SandWing spoke to Moon, "Tell him how terrible it was. All the hate and rage and fury."

Moon fidgeted, skittering her eyes between Umber and Qibli. He had the growing suspicion that she *had* read his thoughts about Flame earlier. He tightened his grip around the skyfire.

"W-well, yes, I did look into his mind."

"Aaaaand?"

"It's like you said. There was so much hatred and anger –"

"See?" Qibli crossed his arms. "I don't know why he's leading you on like this but there's no way you can trust him."

"But that was in the past," Moon's spirited voice spoke firmly. "Maybe Umber's right. Maybe he *has* changed."

Across the room Peril snorted loud enough to startle the bird on the windowsill. "No way he's changed that quickly. Dragons don't just turn over new leaves overnight."

Umber huffed. "Actually he's been working with Healers for a month now –"

"He's probably just using you," Kinkajou interrupted. "Dump him

before something bad happens."

Qibli's anxious voice rose above the din. "And what if he hurts you? He doesn't exactly have the best record for managing his aggression."

As his friends continued their criticism Umber felt the stirrings of an emotion he rarely experienced: anger.

How dare they just bash Flame without even *trying* to keep an open mind about him.

Coupled with a burning protectiveness that exploded in his chest, Umber refused to sit here and listen to this for a moment longer. He stood and slammed his talons on the table. "He's trying his best, OK?! Leave him alone!"

The air became silent as their voices where whisked away in shock.

Umber took a breath as sat back down, his anger smoothly ebbing away with the same speed by which it arrived. "Guys, I know he's done bad things in the past but he *is* putting in the effort to change. He wants to be a better dragon. Can't you give him a chance?"

Kinkajou and Peril remained steadfast in their distrust, their hackles still raised. Turtle and Moon offered soft expressions of sympathy, and Umber felt hopeful that at least a few of his friends were listening to him, but his anticipation still hinged on Qibli's opinion.

The SandWing's eyes were fixed to the ground and Umber could practically feel the hum of his brain as it flashed through all the factors and outcomes. Finally the sandy dragon heaved a sigh.

"I still think we should be cautious about him but you're right, Umber. We should at least give him a chance."

Relief relaxed the MudWing's rigid form and he smiled. Next to him Kinkajou huffed.

"Speak for yourself. He might have changed, but what he did to Stonemover was still pretty messed up." Her scales were bright orange with splotches of reds around the feet.

Again, Umber couldn't deny what they said, although he could at least try to change how they felt.

"I agree, and so does Flame actually. He *really* regrets what he did to Stonemover. In fact, that's why he came here today. To apologize and make amends."

Kinkajou shot up. "He's *here*? Right now? At the Academy? With Stonemover!?"

"Uh, yeah. I think Sunny took him off somewhere but the plan was for him to talk to Stonemover. Why?" Umber cocked his head to the side, not understanding her alarm.

"Why!? I'll tell you why! Because he's probably returned to finish the job!" The RainWing's scales were a slew of so many colours and none of them were probably good.

Umber raised his talons defensively. "Wait, calm down. Really, I promise Flame would never –"

But she wasn't listening. On nimble talons she jumped towards the room's exit. "Come on! We need to make sure he's OK!"

Just as Umber thought he had control of the situation, everything was quickly swirling into chaos all over again. "Wait! Kinkajou! Flame isn't going to hurt Stonemover!" His please fell on deaf ears. She was already out of the library.

Umber looked to his SandWing friend. "Qibli, if we caught up to her you'd be able to convince her to listen to me, right?"

Qibli rubbed his neck begrudgingly and stood up as well "Sorry Umber, but Kink has a point. It's not that I don't believe you, but I'd at least like to check to make sure Stonemover is safe."

"But –"

"Sorry, Umber. Better to be safe than sorry." Before Umber could protest Qibli was gone too. Moon followed swiftly behind him, although she cast an apologetic look his way.

Last to leave was Peril who wore a frightening grin. "I don't know what's going to happen but I'm betting five silver that someone's getting punched!"

With only Umber and Turtle left the room felt hallowed out. Umber knew he should go chase after them, but instead he slammed his head on the table. "Croc spit."

A friendly talon patted his shoulder and Umber turned his head to look up at his SeaWing friend. "Why didn't you run off with the others?" Umber asked.

The Prince shrugged. "Running isn't really my thing. Besides, if you say Flame wouldn't hurt Stonemover then I believe you." Turtle's warm smile kindled in Umber's chest. He smiled back.

"Thanks."

He lifted his sore face off the table and stood. "I guess I should go after them, although I doubt I'll make it there before they do." Just as Umber went to leave he felt Turtle tug at his wing.

"Hold up. You know, a lot of dragons think being lazy means it'll take you forever to get something done when in reality, you just learn to do it more efficiently so it's less work."

"And how does that help us right now?"

"Follow me. I know a shortcut."

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Author's Note:

Wow. So many characters! I tried my best to write them correctly, although their personalities probably come off as pretty shallow here since there was so much going on.

And, as you probably noticed, poor Winter wasn't part of this reunion. As much as I love Winter (he's one of my favourite characters) at the end of Darkness of Dragons he seemed pretty steadfast in his decision to not return to JMA, so I didn't really see a
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logical reason for him to be there. Sorry, Winter. You were greatly missed.

Chapter 37

Flame stepped through the entrance. The room was surprisingly warm with all the candles, but a chill ran up his spine at the sight of the black mass in the center. Gentle rumbles emanated from the stone dragon as his sides slowly rose and fell with each gradual breath. Flame took a step forward, inspecting the dragon. Was he asleep? It was impossible to tell since everything he did was painfully slow.

Feeling like prey out in the open, the SkyWing sneaked around the NightWing to get a look of his face, although it could hardly be called sneaking when his shadows danced along the jagged walls like a big, waving flag.

Flame heaved a relieved sigh when he saw the animus' eyes were closed. He was asleep. That relief vanished an instant later when he realized he would have to wake him up. For a second he considered getting Sunny to do the deed, but decided he should stop being such a pathetic pansy and get this stupid thing over with already.

Sucking in a deep, bracing breath, Flame marched up to the sleeping dragon, raised a talon to tap his nose, chickened out, gathered himself up again, and tapped Stonemover on the snout several times.

The NightWing snorted indignantly, shifted his head and then fell back to sleep, this time with a loud snore.

"You've got to be kidding me," Flame grumbled to himself. He tried again, this time adding some vocal assistance. "WAKE UP YOU OLD LIZARD!"

Stonemover's snore cut off and he lifted his head. "Huh? Wha –"

Groggily he unwound his massive neck and Flame was instantly reminded how enormous Stonemover was. Fully extended the

animus' head loomed above him like a snake made of glittering shadows. The only thing that marred this illusion were the three thick, white gauges beneath the NightWing's jaw.

Flame cringed at the sight of the scars – the one's he had made – but willed himself to look up and meet Stonemover's glassy green eyes.

The old dragon was still partially asleep. He blinked his stone-dusted eyelids several times before they flew open. His sharp inhale made Flame stiffen.

"*You*," Stonemover accused with narrowed eyes.

Unsure of what else to do, Flame spoke a meek greeting, "Erm...hey."

Stonemover leaned away and Flame had a feeling that if old dragon's talons hadn't been made of stone he probably would have scuttled to the back of the cave. How could such a powerful dragon be so cowardly?

"So you *did* come after all. What do you want?" The urgency in his gravelly voice barely concealed a sharp panic.

"Uh, I-I just wanted to apologize for –"

"Well then apologize and be gone with you."

Flame was taken aback by the brash tone. He had never heard Stonemover speak faster than a bored drone.

"OK. Um. I'm sorry?" Even as Flame spoke the fated words they didn't sit right. He had practiced over and over how he was going to apologize, but Stonemover was throwing him off. Instead of a solid, heartfelt amend it had come out more as a confused squawk. This didn't seem to make any different to Stonemover. The old dragon turned away, refusing to look at Flame.

"Fine. Now leave." And with that black dragon curled himself back up and made a show of pretending to fall back asleep.

Flame opened his mouth to speak but close it. He blinked, feeling dazed, like reality had been pushed off kilter or something. Was... that it? Of all the scenarios he had run through his head, this certainly hadn't come up.

He stumbled back towards the exit, waiting for the wave of relief to hit him. He had apologized to Stonemover and lived to tell the tale. Shouldn't he be happy right now? Except...it didn't feel right. It felt empty. The NightWing had rushed him out the door. He hadn't really expected to get Stonemover's forgiveness but SOME sort of acknowledgment or reaction would have been nice.

His talons took him to the edge of the cavern and stopped. Even though she wasn't looking in his direction, Flame could see Sunny's gold scales from where she sat looking into the water. No doubt she expected him to be in there longer.

With an unsatisfied huff Flame looked back at the animus. His head was tucked beneath his stary wing, cowering away from everything just like he always did. Or maybe he just didn't care.

Anger prickled along his spine.

I should have expected as much, Flame sneered in his mind. *He's one of the most powerful dragons in Pyrrhia and he can't even face me. I can't believe I was scared of that spineless lizard. The great and mighty Stonemover: afraid of his own shadow.*

He snorted. He was done obsessing over this sorry excuse of a dragon.

Flame placed on talon through the cave's exit, ready to forget about the dragon who had barely listened to him in the past and now didn't even have enough self-respect to face him. But something pulled his talons back inside. It was his anger, still hot and ripe. He couldn't stop the low growl that came from deep in his throat.

This was the *second* time Stonemover had ignored his please because he couldn't be bothered enough to care. The first time was when he had called Flame vain for wanting his horrible, disfigured face healed so he could live a normal life again, and then the

second time today.

This whole time Flame had harboured so much guilt and regret in his heart. He had truly wanted to make amends so that they could both move on.

But THAT plan got crapped on thanks to Stonemover's inability to give a shit.

Well frankly, Flame had had enough of this. Fury and rage pounded against his skull with savage strength that made his whole body shake. He struggled to contain it, and then realized he didn't want to. He *wanted* to let it out. He *wanted* to put that arrogant son-of-a-bitch NightWing in his place.

And that's exactly what he was going to do.

"You know what?" Flame's snarl bounced around the small room as he turned around. "*Fuck you*."

Stonemover's ears twitched and he curled up tighter. Flame stomped back over to stand before the large dragon, but this time he wasn't about to ask for forgiveness.

"Think you can just ignore me? Well think again, asshole. I'm done dealing with your bullshit! All you do is lay around here moping about how terrible your powers are when literally the only thing you've done with them in the past five years is turn yourself into a depressed statue!"

Stonemover made no motion to argue. He closed himself up even more but Flame could see the tension along his feeble muscles like taut ropes ready to snap. *Good*, he thought. *At least that means he's listening.*

"When Darkstalker came you did nothing. When the mountain nearly shattered over your head with warring dragons you did nothing! The whole school had almost been annihilated; your *daughter* could have been killed! Is there *anything* you care about?"

The animus sighed and shuffled his wings. Icy ribbons of rage pulsed through Flame's muscles and bloomed in white sparks

behind his eyes. He began to pace, his voice becoming a low growl.

"Really? Still nothing to say? Do you know how much misery you've put me through?" The SkyWing hissed. "You said healing my face was a waste of your powers but dammit, all I wanted was my life back! I wanted to walk through a town without people pointing at me, I wanted my mother to look me in the eyes again, I just wanted to be *normal*. I came to you at my lowest point and you turned me away because you were too much of a coward to give a damn!" Flame sucked in a deep breath as the last of his voice shook. His heart thundered beneath his ribs, every pulse like a hammer against his head. He took another breath. Deep and through the nose.

He had lost control again; had allowed his anger to get the better of him.

Remembering what Starf had taught him he removed himself from the moment and focused his mind on his senses. The damp cold of the stone floor, the sound of water dripping into small puddles, the damp spell of stagnant water mixed with the smoky heat from the candles. He exhaled his breath and swallowed the thick wad of spit that clung to the inside of his dry mouth. His talons shook as the veins of rage ebbed away leaving him feeling a little light-headed. He rubbed his face and groaned. The euphoric high of his fury was leaving him to deal with the heavy aftermath of guilt and shame.

This wasn't supposed to happen. He was supposed to be *better* than this!

"Look, I'm sorry, alright?" He waited for a reaction and when none came he continued. "I didn't mean to – I didn't come here to insult you. I wanted to apologize and move on with my life. I regret that I tried to kill you. Honest. I – I had never tried to hurt someone like that before."

Flame rubbed his arm timidly, feeling like a tiny hatchling standing before a goliath. A sudden urge to explain himself took hold. Maybe it was to prove to Stonemover he wasn't just mindlessly violent. Or maybe it was to prove it to himself.

"Listen, I – I was in a really dark place at the time. I know it's just a

stupid scar to you, but to me..." Flame clenched his jaws, the words sticking to the insides of his mouth like taffy, refusing to leave until pushed. "My mother was so disgusted by my face when she first saw me. NOW I understand I was just being stupid but at the time I thought my scar was making her hate me. I thought that if you fixed my face...it would fix everything else that was wrong in my life."

Flame tore his gaze from the floor and was startled to see Stonemover's glassy green eyes now peering at him from beneath his wing. The old dragon's expression was unreadable, although that might have been partly due to the fact that half his face was still covered. A tense silence filled the chamber as the young dragon waited and waited for something to happen. For some acknowledgement or even a blink.

Finally the NightWing dropped his gaze. His green eyes pensive.

Flame shook his head. If Stonemover wasn't going to listen to him before then why the hell would he now after Flame had just yelled at him?

He had messed up his once chance at redemption.

Flame sighed. "I should just go," he murmured with his head bowed. Slowly he made his way back to the exit.

Dammit! Why was I so stupid! I should have just left the first time. Why did I have to go back and open my stupid fucking mouth and –

"Do you not think I'm well aware of how pathetic I am?"

Flame nearly jumped out of his scales as Stonemover's soft, grimly voice broke his thoughts. He whipped around to see the old dragon had lifted his head, although he wasn't looking at Flame. His gaze was fixed on the flickering shadows on the wall in front of him.

"Do you honestly think I enjoy sitting here in the dark, knowing that just beyond these walls is a world so vibrant and full of life it makes my heart ache."

Flame blinked back his amazement. He had never heard such

emotions come from the animus. Sure, the same melancholic wheezing was present, but now it was accompanied by something deeper. Desire, maybe? Longing? Hunger?

Stonemover's haunches twitched. "All I have to do is say the word and I could leave this mountain for good."

Flame had carefully made his way back to sit next to the black dragon. He titled his head to the side. "Then why don't you? Nothing's stopping you. Why waste your life in this dump when you don't have to?"

The SkyWing took a step back as Stonemover puffed out his chest, a glint crackling in his eyes. A second later the glint vanished as the familiar numbing mist clouded the NightWing's eyes once again. Stonemover's whole body seemed to collapse in on itself.

Whatever fire Flame's words had lit had been quickly smothered with the expertise of someone used to doing such things.

"No. I cannot." Stonemover looked down at his stone talons. "My powers are too dangerous. This is the only way Pyrrhia can be safe."

Flame rolled his eyes so hard he saw his brain. It was the same, old excuse again and again.

"Oh come OOON!" Flame groaned. "You're an *animus*. You could enchant something to prevent you from becoming evil or doing bad shit. It's not that hard!"

"But my soul –"

"Then enchant something to keep your soul pure! Problem solved!"

Stonemover shook his head, huffing out a condescending chuckle that made Flame's blood boil. Luckily the shame from his last tantrum was keeping him in check.

"Young dragon, you will never understand what it's like to have these powers. Their capabilities are beyond what your naïve mind can imagine."

Flame snorted. If anyone here lacked imagination it was Stonemover, not him.

"So what? You're just going to stay here for the rest of your miserable life until you die?"

Stonemover sighed. "I suppose so. If you can call what I'm doing now as 'living'."

Flame felt like ripping out his horns in frustration. How could someone be so apathetic? "AAARGH! So it doesn't matter to you that you'll be forgotten and die alone?"

Stonemover sighed yet again. "I've spent the past seven years dying and being forgotten. What difference would another lifetime make?"

"And when Sunny leaves your sorry ass to go live her life, when she moves on and forgets about you, you'll be fine with that?"

This time the old dragon didn't sigh. He shifted uncomfortably. "Sunny wouldn't abandon me."

The defensiveness in the stone dragon's voice made Flame pause. He pursed his lips, inspecting the NightWing. *Interesting. Maybe there* is *something he cares about after-all.*

It seemed he actually did care about his daughter, or at least the idea of her leaving him. Without meaning to Flame had finally been able to pull back the melancholic cloak that draped the animus' form and see what was beneath, if only for a second. Whatever it was, it reeked of fear and loneliness.

Flame pondered this information. Was there a way to pull the cloak completely? To see what lay buried beneath?

A light went off in his head. Yes, there was a way. But it wasn't going to be pleasant.

Now, Flame had been told by Starfish many times that it was rude to exploit dragons' insecurities to get a reaction out of them and that it was mean and blah blah blah, but Flame was pretty sure those were just guidelines anyway. Besides, Stonemover needed the

push; weather he wanted it or not was no concern of Flame's. This was for his own good.

Flame honed in on the weakness with claws outstretched, chasing it down like fleeing prey.

"Are you sure?" He leaned against the nearby boulder that had crumbled away from the wall. "You think Sunny is going to wanna stick around here mothering you while she has more important things going on?"

Stonemover's frown twitched. "She wouldn't leave the school. So long as the school is still here she'll stay."

Flame felt the animus' fear struggle as he caught it in his talons. Felt it's heartbeat as it thrashed to escape his words.

"The school's already off to a shaky start as is," Flame scoffed. "Who knows if it'll last. And Sunny might find something else to do. She might go back to the Sand Kingdom with Thorn or to the Rainforest with that RainWing friend of hers who's queen or something." He shrugged. "Or maybe she'll just decide to leave one day and never come back."

"She – she'd come back to visit me." The NightWing was becoming increasingly agitated. Flame squeezed the thing wriggling in his grasp.

"Maybe at first," he offered. "But eventually she'd get tired of it, or just end up forgetting about you all together."

"No – she wouldn't –"

Even by Flame's standards this conversation was getting pretty grim. He didn't enjoy watching Stonemover squirm, but he wasn't going to back down until he reached the core; some small glimmer of emotion that would indicate a beating heart beneath those black scales.

"Once she's gone then you'll be alone again. Sitting in the dark, waiting for the next dragon to accidently find you."

That was the fatal blow.

"Enough!" His bellow shook the room. Flame ducked beneath his wing as loose pebbles came raining down overhead. Nearby a stalactite shattered to the floor, nearly impaling his tail.

Stonemover's eyes locked onto him; green chasms that howled and crackled with pain and fear like the billowing throws of a storm.

Flame's heart stopped. He remained immobilized, waiting for Stonemover's wrath to strike him down.

Now I've done it.

But no thunderous retribution came.

Instead Stonemover released a choked sob, his wings splaying out onto the floor as if he no longer had the energy to keep them in place. He didn't cry, but his lips were curled back in an expression of pain. "Please. Enough," he begged. A shudder passed over his body as he took in a mournful breath. "I know she'll leave me someday. Why should she stay with me when she has her whole life to live? But – she's all I have left." Desperate eyes met Flame's in a silent plea. "Please, at least let me pretend she'll come back for me...even if she doesn't."

Flame's heart kicked back to life as the tense atmosphere of impending danger ebbed away. Still keeping at a safe distance Flame narrowed his eyes. "I thought you didn't care."

Stonemover bowed his head, his eyelids lowered in rumination. "I – I thought so too," he whispered.

Now Flame was even more confused than before.

So Stonemover *did* care about stuff – but why the hell didn't he ever show it? Was it just an act or what?

Flame's whole body was suddenly jolted as the hammer of understanding struck his head. It *was* an act. A performance so well played that not even Stonemover himself realized he still cared. But at *some* point the NightWing must have made the conscious decision

to pretend he didn't care. Yet why go to all that trouble? Why choke your emotions down to appear like an empty husk.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Flame reluctantly understood that as well. The apathy was just a mask that Stonemover used to hide his fears behind.

Flame knew this because that was exactly what he did, except in his case it wasn't apathy, it was fury. Flame used his anger to cover up his own insecurities and lashed out at all those who tried to uncover them.

With swollen remorse Flame could finally see how similar he and Stonemover were after all. The idea annoyed him.

Dammit, Flame cursed as his heart involuntarily lurched. He didn't *want* to feel empathy for the dragon. All Stonemover's problems were self-inflicted and could be easily solved if the old animus had an ounce of resolve. But now he had gone and formed some bullshit kinship with the crusty NightWing based on, what, the fact that they were both messed up assholes? Yeah, that sounded about right.

As much as he tried to fight it, it ripped at his heart to see the NightWing so distressed and, begrudgingly, he felt the need to fix the chaos his words and reaped.

This is what I get for hanging around big saps like Umber and Starfish. Their mushiness must be rubbing off on me.

Flame sighed and uneasily shuffled towards the dejected form of Stonemover. He cleared his throat. "Look, I know all that sounds pretty terrible, but you can *choose* a different life than that."

Stonemover glanced up, his eyes skeptical.

"Don't look at me like that! It's true." Flame wobbled his talons around in the air, trying to gather his thoughts into something that sounded smart.

He remembered the last time he had tried to give someone useful advice. It had been Sora, after she had run away and refused to go back to the Healing Center. Whatever he had said back then had

worked, maybe it would work a second time.

He clasped his talons together. "Listen, I know it probably doesn't look like it, but I've actually learned a lot of stuff in the past month, and I can tell you with some amount of surety that everyone deserves a second chance. I have no idea what you did that made you want to run and hide in a mountain, but that's not who you are anymore...right?"

Stonemover grumbled and rested his head on his talons. "It's not about what I *did* do; it's what I *might* do." His green eyes locked onto a flickering candle, their expression vacant as if looking at something far off in the distance. He spoke in a shaking voice, "If I lose my soul to this power there would be no telling what terrible things –"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," Flame butted in. "If you lose your soul we're all going to *die* and it's going to be *terrible* and blah blah blah. But that's all just *hypothetical* though. What if you don't lose your soul and everything turns out fine?"

Stonemover was still unconvinced. "I – I still don't think it's a good idea."

Flame shuffled a little closer, trying his best to imitate Starfish's encouraging smile and hoping he didn't just look like a grinning idiot. "Come on, you deserve a better life than this."

Stonemover sighed. "I don't deserve anything."

"Yes you do!"

Both males shot up as Sunny stood the entrance, her face severe and serious. A moment later the expression flickered away to reveal bashful smile. "Oh, sorry to interrupt. I heard yelling so I thought I'd come to make sure no one was being killed. But Flame's right, father."

The firelight glittered along her scales as she came to sit next to her parent. She rested her talon atop of his and cradled his gaze, her eyes brimming green pools of compassion and love. "You deserve

more than this. I want you to be happy."

Stonemover's stubborn frown wavered slightly at her words. The edges of his mouth titling up to form a ghost of a smile. For a second Flame was actually hopeful that *something* was getting through that thick, forlorn head.

"Well – maybe I could –" Whatever Stonemover was about to say was snatched away as a tremor of terror flashed in his eyes. He quickly shook his head, his set frown returning. "No. It's too risky. Staying here is the only way to keep Pyrrhia, to keep *you*, safe."

In a rare show of frustration Sunny let out a brisk little huff and clenched her jaw, a frown maturing on her face. Flame was a little taken aback at how easily Sunny had become aggravated; he hardly ever seen her without that obnoxious cheery grin of hers.

But it soon occurred to him that Sunny had probably had this conversation with her father numerous times before. Just being in the same room as Stonemover for five minutes had used up all Flame's patience. He couldn't imagine what spending day after day with the old NightWing would do, constantly hearing the same old excuses and sighing and moans and whatever other annoying sounds he probably made.

He really couldn't blame her for getting annoyed so quickly...and he really wasn't in the position to judge either.

"But you don't *have* to live like this!" She bore down with unyielding command. "The other animus dragons here at the school are living life just fine. I even told you the enchantment they used to protect their souls! I don't understand why you're making this so difficult!"

Flame nodded a few times then jolted to a halt. "Wait...there are other animus dragons at the school?"

He let out a cross snort when no one answered. The father and daughter pair were too caught up in their squabble.

As per usual Stonemover was being aggressively dismal. "Yes, but *they* didn't rip holes through space to create portals large enough to

connect three tribes! Who knows what will happen if I'm freed. Once I reverse this spell on my scales the corruption will go back onto my soul and we all saw what happened with Darkstalker. Not even *he* could tell his own soul had putrefied and look where it lead." He shook his head hopelessly. "No. So long as I am cursed with these powers I must do whatever it takes to keep them contained."

Sunny's brow lowered into an almost threatening display. "Honestly, and I thought *mother* was the stubborn one in the family."

Stonemover snorted, blowing out a nearby candle. "You'll understand my wisdom when you're older. No one should have the kind of power I yield. It is a burden, but one I must bear."

Flame rolled his eyes. It was getting harder and harder to fight the urge to strangle this guy. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. If you're never going to use your powers again then just get rid of them and leave this dump!"

Something shifted behind the animus' eyes at the suggestion. Panic? Guilt? Fear? All three mingled together in a flash so quick its presence vanished as quickly as it came, replaced by a disdainful grimace. Stonemover scoffed. "Do you not think I haven't had that idea in the past? I refuse to waste my soul on any more enchantments." A worrying expression creased his brow. "I've already done enough damage no doubt. Any soul I have left I want to preserve."

"And none of the other animus dragons would do it for you? You know, the ones that apparently have their souls protected?" Flame had been paying attention to what Sunny said earlier, about the two other animus dragons at the school. "It doesn't seem like that big of a deal to just ask them to take away your powers."

He looked to Sunny whose expression turned thoughtful. "Well, I suppose I could always ask them. They've been through so much lately I was a little hesitant to ask for any magical favours, but whatever enchantment they used on their souls seems to have worked." She gave her father a tender, hopeful smile. "How about that? What if we got Turtle or Anemone to remove your magic?"

With bulging eyes Stonemover frantically shook his head. "No!" His hoarse voice cracked at the panicked exertion. He cleared his throat, his expression returning to dreary. "Ahem, no, I don't think that would be a good idea. I could never ask another animus to waste their soul to help me. The only option is for me to remain here."

Sunny and Flame exchanged wary glances. Even by Stonemover's standards that was a weird reaction...and suspicious. Slowly that new-found empathy Flame had developed for the stone dragon was beginning to dry up as distrust took its place. He inspected the NightWing with a cool glare before growling. "Are you deaf? She *literally* said their souls are protected. This is your golden ticket to freedom and you *still* decide to stay here? What the hell is wrong with you?"

The NightWing growled in turn, a rumble like growing thunder. He shot Flame an icy glare. "Enough of this foolishness. You will *never* understand what it's like to have power. *Real* power. I could flip this mountain upside-down if I wished, or turn the ocean into lava if I felt like it. Reality is my plaything. And what have *you* accomplished, hmm? What significant impact will you ever have on this world...besides being a failed killer?"

"Father!" Sunny squawked with mortification.

The venom in his voice was like a punch to his chest, causing Flame to stagger back. Sunny and Flame gaped at Stonemover, who himself seemed appalled by his words, his mouth hanging open in an attempt to explain his outburst. But nothing came out and he closed his mouth, turning away with an expression of confusion bending the aged lines of his face.

It took Flame only a few moments before the shock passed and a new wave of rage took root in his core. Heat wafted from his flushed face that burned with embarrassment and anger.

He had been right all along. Stonemover was nothing but an arrogant prick. Hot embers prickled along his spine, igniting white sparks in his vision.

"Well I guess that's it then," Flame concluded, his voice cool and low. "There's no way to convince you to leave, is there?"

Stonemover shook his head. "No, I suppose not." He still refused to look at Flame.

Tenderly Sunny stroked her father's cheek, brushing away the dust that had built up along the ridges of his face. Obviously she still saw him as some victim of fear rather than what he really was. But Flame had gotten over that illusion real fast. He snorted out a cloud of black smoke.

"Well this was a waste of my fucking time. If you want to stay here and rot then fine."

"Flame!" Sunny hissed, giving him a dirty look while resting a comforting talon on her father's arm.

Flame shot the look right back at her. "What? Don't get mad at me for not coddling him like you do. He has SO many opportunities to get out of this mess but he still just sits there moping. It's almost as if he WANTS to stay here." He glared at Stonemover, feeling betrayed. A moment ago he had thought them alike, both wanting a new life but stuck behind the barriers they had built to keep the world out.

He had forgotten how deceitful NightWings could be.

The animus was apparently terrified of his own powers, yet when given the chance to get rid of them he instantly had an excuse ready. And the condescending airs the animus put on hadn't escape Flame's notice either. He *liked* being powerful.

"In fact, I don't even think he really *wants* to get rid of his powers. Once an arrogant NightWing, always and arrogant NightWing. Can't stand the idea of being common like the rest of us but too spineless to actually do anything about it."

"*Enough*, Flame." She was standing now, sternness pulling her brown down into a sharp angle. But the expression broke and she slumped back down with sagging wings. Disappointment laced her voice.

"Maybe it was a mistake to bring you down here... perhaps you should leave."

Flame felt burning fire swell in his chest. He wanted nothing more than to scorch something to a crisp. Using all of his will he swallowed the inferno back. He clenched his jaw. "Whatever. His forgiveness is worthless to me now anyway."

Just as turned to leave, Stonemover called him back. "Flame. Wait."

Flame didn't want to listen but his body followed the request and stopped in its place. He watched as the animus turned to his daughter and sighed. "Don't be upset with him, Sunny. He has the right to be angry. What I said was...out of line."

"So you admit it?" Flame demanded. "You *do* want to keep your powers."

Stonemover's eyes flashed defensively. "I'm not admitting anything!"

While anger still pulsed in his head, confusion and curiosity were weakening its influence on his mind. Flame splayed his wings out in exasperation. "I don't get it, what the hell is going on with you? One minute you want your powers gone, the next you don't. One second you're meek and quiet but then you're all defensive and angry. What gives?"

Sunny, too, looked to her father for answers. "You *are* acting kind of weird, father. Is everything alright?"

The old dragon curled his tail precariously over his body, his demeanour skittish. "There are ... many parts of myself that I am ashamed of; parts I'd rather keep to myself." He tilted his head towards them. "Sitting down here in the dark gives me lots of time to reflect on them...not that there's much else to do," he commented through a dry scoff.

"Hurry up and get to the point!" Flame pushed. Sunny glanced at him with warning while making an obvious move to put herself between him and her father.

"Right. Sorry," Stonemover mumbled. "Well, while there are things I

am ashamed to admit ... perhaps it is time I faced them." Firelight turned his eyes copper as he glanced back and forth between the two dragons. "I – I meant what I said before. I *am* afraid of these powers. They bring nothing but death and destruction. But –"

He swallowed, the lump traveling slowly down his long neck. He exhaled and his whole body seemed to compress as the air left his lungs. "But at the same time I don't know what I'd be without them. My whole life, these powers have been the only thing that gave me purpose and worth, at least to those such as Marrowseer."

At the sound of the treacherous NightWing's name Flame's stomach clench and fire licked the back of throat but he bit his tongue to hold it in. He wanted to hear this.

"With them, I am a monster, yes, but without them..." he paused, his face paling to an ashy gray, "...I am nothing."

Sunny rested her talons over her heart, a sympathetic pout adorning her face. "Father, that's not true! No one is worthless. If you just left this mountain you would see – "

"If I left this mountain I would still have nothing," Stonemover asserted. "The NightWings will not want the animus that abandoned them to return. Thorn has long since moved on, and I've been down here so long that my muscles have all but withered away. How would I hunt or fly? If I leave I will have nowhere to go and no means of survival."

"You're always welcomed to stay at the school! We can carve you out a room and everything!" Sunny, bless her enthusiastic heart, wasn't giving up.

Stonemover gave a weary smile of amusement. "Right, and I'm sure your students would love to have a grumpy old NightWing terrorizing their halls. I appreciate the offer, but if I'm going to stay at the school I might as well stay here where I won't be in anyone's way."

Flame bit the inside of his cheek in thought. He was still angry at Stonemover but, once again, he felt himself empathizing.

Marrowseer had fucked up his life too. Knowing how manipulative that giant fart-bag had been, he had probably warped Stonemover's mind into thinking he was only useful as a pawn. He understood where Stonemover was coming from. The guy had no purpose anymore, or at least that's what he thought.

It irked Flame to know that, if he were in Stonemover's position, he wouldn't know what to do either: live as a powerful prisoner with the illusion that you're protecting others, or live as a helpless, powerless nobody with no place to call home?

Flame sighed and rubbed his forehead. Whatever the problem was, it wasn't going to be solved here and now. Stonemover needed help, as in Starf-level help. Not some-angry-guy-yelling-at-you-about-your-insecurities-level help. That's when Flame was struck with an idea.

"You could always go to the Healing Center. They'd take care of you," he suggested, involuntary excitement lacing his voice. He hadn't meant to sound so enthusiastic about being helpful, he was still trying to be angry.

Stonemover gave a blank expression and Sunny, anticipating his question, spoke up. "That's the new giant clinic in the Sky Kingdom I told you about. With the Soul Healers and all."

The NightWing's brow lifted in recognition. "Oh. That place. I was under the impression it was only meant for war veterans."

Flame scoffed. "Nah, it's for everyone. I mean, I got it and I'm sure as hell not a veteran."

With rising excitement glowing in her eyes, Sunny energetically tapped her father's talon. "How about that? Would you leave the mountain to go to the Healing Center?"

"I don't know... I hardly know anything about the place."

Flame grinned. "Well luckily for you, I have some experience in that area."

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Flame described the Healing Center as best he could, trying to focus on stuff he thought Stonemover would be interested in. Doing his best to remember all the useless stuff Jet told him during his tour, he also highlighted the physical therapy programs that the NightWing would probably need in addition to his work with the Soul Healers.

"You get free food, a place to sleep, someone to tell all your problems to." Flame shrugged. "All in all it seems like the kind of place you'd belong."

The NightWing wore a pensive expression, but a whisper of hope glowed behind his eyes. "And – you think they'd let someone like me in?"

"Well yeah, I mean, they let ME in didn't they?" Flame shrugged again. "I don't think there's a specific criteria or anything. If you need help they'll help."

Stonemover nodded, his face a solemn mask of contemplation. "Thank you for sharing this with me. I feel ... relieved to know there is a place for me to go if I leave. But I'd still like to think about it first. This is a lot to consider."

"Yeah, I understand," Flame said. He hadn't expected a rousing leap into action, but the animus' shy interest was enough to suggest that maybe he had come a little closer to moving on. Although it would probably take a while longer to completely convince him. Maybe Starf could say something to him. "If you want, I could get Starf – erm, my Soul Healer that is – to talk to you or something..." Flame scratched his chin in thought, "Assuming he hasn't left me here and gone back already. How long do you think we've been down here?"

Sunny twisted her mouth in thought. "It's been a while – probably most of the morning is gone by now. We should get you back before Tsunami organizes a search party." She stood up and nuzzled her father. "It's time for Flame to leave now, father. Is there anything else you wanted to say to him before we go? Are you guys OK now?"

Stonemover stretched out his neck to full it's full length, candlelight

cascading over ebony scales as he shifted in their flickering warmth. An air of wise benevolence rolled off him as he peered down at the younger dragons. "Actually, yes, there are a few things I'd like to say." The NightWing beckoned the red dragon over with his tail. Cautiously Flame stood before the stone dragon to hear what had to be said. The animus lowered his head to level it with Flame's.

"First of all, I wanted to apologize for making you think I didn't care. I didn't mean to belittle your pain or mock your misery when you came to me asking to heal your face. I only refused to do so out of my own fear of my powers, not because I enjoyed watching you suffer." He dipped his head. "I hope you can forgive me."

The SkyWing's jaw swung open and he quickly closed it as something warm and fuzzy displaced the previous anger he had held in his heart. This whole day had been a whirlwind of emotions, especially with Stonemover. He had gone from fearing him, to empathizing with him, back to hating him and finally...well, he wasn't sure how he felt now.

It wasn't hate or fear but maybe...respect?

Stonemover certainly wasn't perfect but neither was Flame. Both of them had a long ways to go, and Flame had to respect the guy for acknowledging he needed to change.

With a timid smile Flame dipped his head in turn. "Yeah, I forgive you...as long as you can forgive me for, you know, trying to kill you and all – and also all the horrible things I said to you in the past hour. I – I didn't mean them I was just trying to – "

"Trying to get a reaction out of me, eh?" Stonemover smirked at Flame's startled expression. "Just because I fell for your plan didn't mean I wasn't aware of what you were trying to do. But honestly – I think I needed to be shook to my senses, even if the process was...unpleasant."

Flame shrank. "Yeaaah.... sorry again."

Stonemover gave his own shy smile. "Well, I forgive you. And not just for what happened today, but also for your past actions."

The SkyWing shot back to his normal height, clamping his mouth shut to avoid letting out a gasp. "So...that means..."

"Yes, all is forgiven," Stonemover confirmed.

Relief coursed through Flame's body like water tumbling through a broken dam. He had actually done it. Stonemover had forgiven him.

Nearby Sunny began to clap. "Yes! This is exactly what I hoped would happen!"

Flame rolled his eyes and Stonemover smirked at his daughters antics. Without another word and with one last nod Flame bid the old dragon farewell and joined Sunny as they made their way out of the cave.

Sunny's eyes sparkled as a wide grin split her face. "Things got pretty tense there for a bit, but I'm glad everything went according to plan."

Flame eyed her with surprise. "Wait – you mean this was part of a plan all along?"

"Well...not literally, but I knew you'd be able to talk some sense into him." She winked.

"More like I just yelled at him for a while but sure, we'll just say I *talked* some sense into him."

Sunny laughed but then quieted down, drawing her head towards him she spoke in a low whisper, "And...do you really think my father would be able to go to the Healing Center?"

Flame let out a dry laugh. "Of course, except the hard part isn't going to getting him in, it's going to be convincing him to leave this place."

Sunny nodded sadly in agreement.

They reached the cave's exit and climbed through, but before Flame left he looked back one last time at the animus. His massive head was resting on his talons, his gaze fixed on the center of a nearby

candle, but for a moment, Flame swore he saw a fiery glint in those green eyes. He shook the image away and climbed through into the larger chamber outside.

"Well I'm glad we got all THAT over with. If Starfish is still around maybe I'll give him that tour. OH! Did you guys want to stay for supper! I think Clay is going to – "

As Sunny chatted away Flame's attention wandered around the cavern. Bats huddled on the roof in sparse clusters, their mirror image reflected in the calm waters below.

Just as they began their ascent to the surface, bubbles began to foam along the top of the lake. The bats began to screech and shuffled around nervously. Flame grimaced and interrupted Sunny's stream of thoughts. "Hey, these lakes don't release toxic gases or something, do they?"

Sunny paused in her speech and tilted her head, equally perplexed. "Not that I know of. I've never seen that happen before."

The cause of the bubbles was revealed a second later when the glowing head of a SeaWing breached the surface. In the dim light Flame thought Starfish had come to rescue him, but soon he realized this wasn't Starf.

This SeaWing was too young and too green, and instead of a confident smile his face was all wobbly lines of anxiety. With a grunt the SeaWing pulled himself out of the water, his webbed feet making wet slapping sounds as he stomped around on the stone floor and looked around.

Sunny cocked her head in confusion, her eyes squinting through the darkness. "Turtle? Is that you?"

The one named Turtle perked at the sight of his teacher. "Sunny! I found you!" He huffed out a sigh of relief. "I was beginning to worry I'd never find the right cave. You guys stay here! I'll be right back!" Without warning he jumped back into the lake, sending a spray of water that slapped the walls as he went.

Moments later he resurfaced, but this time a second head accompanied his as they bobbed towards the lake's edge. This one was broad with a flat, square snout tipped with an adorable little burn mark. Curious amber eyes turned gleeful as the MudWing spotted him.

"Flame!" Umber called while climbing out of the water.

Flame hadn't realize how drained he had been until the sight of Umber sent a rejuvenating hum through his body. Forgetting about everyone around him, he zipped towards the brown dragon feeling lighter than air. Even though he had seen the MudWing mere hours ago that didn't stop him from wrapping the dripping dragon in his wings for a hug. Umber nuzzled himself against Flame's neck, his warm breath sending more pleasing hums along the SkyWing's body.

"What are you doing down here?" Flame asked as he pulled away.

Umber gave him a sweet smile, though it seemed a little strained. His eyes kept darting towards the tunnels as if something were about to come barrelling down. "I just wanted to make sure everything was OK and that you weren't, oh, I don't know, being mauled by an angry RainWing or something."

Flame's smile dropped to a frown. He released his grip on Umber and slowly brought his talons back to the ground. "That's...an oddly specific thing to worry about."

Umber blinked innocently. "Is it?"

Sunny padded up to the group, inspecting the two new arrivals with the same suspicion that Flame felt growing in himself. "Yes, it is. What's going on here?"

Umber and the SeaWing exchanged weary glances. Umber rubbed his neck guiltily. "Weeeeelll – the thing is – I was hanging out with my old Winglet and might have let slip that Flame was here to see Stonemover."

"And now Kinkajou and the others think Flame's going to hurt the

animus!" Turtle added, nervously shifting his weight between his talons.

"So now they're on their way to stop him and will probably be showing up any minute," Umber finished with a regretful sag of his wings.

Sunny groaned and buried her face in the palm of her talons. "Great. *This* is why I wanted to keep Flame's visit under wraps." She released a sigh. "I suppose there's nothing to do now but wait till they arrive and talk things out."

Flame, however, wasn't worried at all. His talons scored shallow gashes of anticipation along the floor and he let out a scoff. "Whatever. If it's a fight they want then it's a fight they'll get! I ain't afraid of – " his sentence was cut short as Umber and Sunny shot him a stern glare. Flame cleared his throat, realizing maybe he was being a smidgen too aggressive. "Uh, I mean, I hope we can work things out peacefully and stuff."

Umber nodded his approval.

"Well I should certainly hope so!" A new voice boomed from the tunnels. Flame turned around to see a particularly peeved looking RainWing, her scales swaths of orange and greens. She carefully made her way over fallen boulders and emerging stalagmites to sit next to Turtle. She tilted her head towards Flame. "Besides, I seriously doubt you could take me in a fight."

Flame snorted in derision, inspecting the small dragon with a jeer. "Yeah right, I'd like to see you try, pipsqueak. And who the hell are you supposed to be anyway?"

The small RainWing puffed out her chest, her voice loud and proud. "I'm Kinkajou: member of the Jade Winglet, saviour of Pyrrhia, and defeater of Darkstalker, and you," she pointed a talon at him, "have some explaining to do, mister."

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Author's Note:
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The big finale! Flame finally faced Stonemover! Too bad Kinkajou had to show up and take him down a notch or two ;3

Chapter 38

Umber had never considered himself much of a leader. That was Reed's department. Whenever bickering fell out between the sibs, or someone ate someone else's wombat, or took the good sleeping mud-patch, Reed was the one who stepped forward to keep the peace.

Umber, however, avoided confrontation with a deep rooted, unyielding panic. He'd rather be eaten alive by a riverbed of hippos than be in the middle of an argument.

Once he had gotten into an argument with Pheasant over whose turn it was for hunting duty. His easily riled up sister had stomped off in a huff. Umber had felt so bad he had offered to take up hunting duty for the next month. Luckily Reed hadn't let him do that.

Now, as Kinkajou strode forward, pointing talons and throwing accusations, Umber felt his whole sternum cringe and fold in on itself.

"I'm Kinkajou: member of the Jade Winglet, saviour of Pyrrhia, and defeater of Darkstalker, and you," she pointed a talon at Flame, "have some explaining to do, mister."

Flame merely yawned and scratched his cheek, uninterested. "Huh. Never head of you."

Veins of red spiked along her scales. She scowled. "Fine. Let me rephrase. I'm Kinkajou: the dragons that's about to shove a bunch of rocks up that arrogant nose of yours!"

Before she could even lift a talon off the ground Sunny, Umber, and Turtle barreled between the two quarrelling dragons, their voices clashing together in a chorus of outcries. Umber was at Flame's side of course, although the red dragon hadn't made any move to

reciprocate Kinkajou's actions. In fact, beneath the thick veneer of annoyance he looked half-amused.

"No one's sticking rocks up anything," Sunny said with her talons firmly rooted to the ground. "We are going to settle this like adults. No fighting or threats. Got it, Flame?"

The SkyWing balked. "What did *I* do?"

"You know what you did!" the RainWing answered him.

"Same goes for you." Sunny swung her head back towards Kinkajou. Despite Sunny being a generally small dragon, she still had several inches over the other female. Kinkajou flicked her ears in annoyance but didn't protest. Instead she silently sat down with all the grace and chilly airs of a courtly IceWing.

"Good," Sunny breathed with heavy relief as if she hadn't expected that to work. Kinkajou and Flame were still staring each other down, sticking their tongues out at each other when Sunny wasn't looking, but at least no one was snorting stones. Yet.

Flame's cocky scoff nearly startling Umber with its grating harshness. "So now what? Are we going to make a friendship circle and talk about our feelings?"

"Maybe," Sunny snapped, warning Flame to not tempt her with the idea.

"Well I have some feelings I'd like to share," Kinkajou proclaimed and Flame rolled his eyes as if to say 'of course you do'. "First off, I'd like to know why you felt the need to come back and torment poor Stonemover. Hasn't he been through enough?"

"What!? I didn't come to torment him, I came to apologize," Flame protested.

"He's telling the truth, Kinkajou," Sunny's soothing tones joined the echoes of the chamber. "He came here to make peace with my father, and they were able to settle their conflict. I don't know where this misunderstanding began, but Flame did *not* come here to hurt Stonemover."

Flame crossed his arms. "Misunderstanding my ass. I think she just came here to start a fight."

Kinkajou released a squawked cry of disbelief. "*You're* the one that started this fight! Always being a bully and insulting everyone! Why can't you just admit you're being a jerk and say sorry?"

The red dragon's face remained an unchanging sheet of displeasure, although Umber noticed the way his wings bunch up in a subtle wince. Kinkajou's words had struck a guilty nerve.

"Not to mention the mean stuff you did to me personally, like that time you stole my grapefruit!"

Flame tilted his head. "Wait...what grapefruit?"

"The one you stole from me! Weren't you listening?" Kinkajou was standing now. "You took it right out of my talons and when I told you to give it back you said some *very* rude things which I will not repeat in the presence of Turtle."

The SeaWing, who was seated beside the volatile RainWing, nodded in gratitude before frowning. "Hey, wait a minute! I'm not a hatchling; I can handle grown up words!"

Flame rolled his eyes. "If you call them 'grown up words' then, no, you can't handle them."

"Heck!" Turtle exclaimed. "See, I can say bad words too!"

Kinkajou shook her head. "That's not a bad word."

At his friends disappointed huff Umber sent him a sympathetic smile. Half the time he himself could hardly handle Flame's string of creative language. "Trust me, knowing Flame you probably don't *want* to know what he said."

"Exactly!" Kinkajou confirmed. She sat back down, primly wrapping her slender tail over her talons. She fixated on Flame. "Anyway, I think I deserve an apology, don't you?"

Flame leaned back and sucked in a looooooooong deep breath

through his nose then exhaled. He shrugged. "Alright."

"Well you just – oh," Kinkajou paused mid yell, blinking in confusion. Her scales swirled orange and purple. "You...agree with me?"

Even Umber was taken aback.

Flame was not one to back down from a fight. Whereas Umber shriveled away from conflict like a dried up flower, Flame thrived on it. He loved go argue and fight, and would probably chew off his own foot before surrendering.

So, at a time like this, Umber knew to be suspicious.

Flame nodded. "Well, you're not wrong. I was – am – a jerk sometimes. I said some pretty bad stuff and did some bad things. I can admit to that."

Umber then felt a little bad for feeling suspicious. Maybe Flame was just trying to show how much he's changed. Wouldn't a good boyfriend be supportive instead of apprehensive?

The RainWing across from him shifted her talons uneasily. "So I get an apology?"

"Of course!" Flame agreed a little too sweetly before leaning forward, all pretenses of sweetness swallowed up by a glower. "After YOU admit that you wrongfully assumed I was here to hurt Stonemover. Once you apologize for that THEN I'll give my own."

And just like that the fight was back on. Sometimes Umber just wanted to smack that hot-headed SkyWing upside the head just as much as he wanted to kiss him.

"I don't THINK so!" The RainWing stomped her talon.

Next thing he knew the two of them were in each other's face, pointing talons and throwing insults out like candy at a parade. Sunny's head was subtly tilted upwards as if awaiting some divine intervention that would put an end to this ruckus. The ashen tone of her face seemed to indicate she had had a long day.

Turtle was pulling at Kinkajou's arm, trying to talk her down despite his soft voice being completely overtaken by the yelling. He frowned helplessly.

Meanwhile Umber bounced from talon to talon, feeling extremely agitated as the shouting increased into a frenzy. Their voices were like hornets burrowing under his scales to sting him with burning venom. His head pounded in rhythm with his heart. He couldn't stand this any longer.

"Knock it off you two!" Umber stepped between them. His actions were so sudden he didn't even register what he had done until their angry faces snapped towards him with mechanical unison. The air in the cave zinged with tension like a worn rope pulled to its limit, threads snapping free at the center as both sides pulled. He had just felt this urgency to do *something*, to put an end to this argument. But now that he had their attention, he had no idea what to do next. He wasn't Reed. He was just timid little Umber. He gulped.

In his moment of hesitation his instinct was to look at Flame. The SkyWing was slightly flushed from arguing, chest puffed out arrogantly. He was beautiful and infuriating. The whole 'smack-or-kiss' conflict was kicking up and Umber fought the urge by putting on the sternest face he could muster.

"Come on, Flame, would it really be *that* terrible to give one little apology?"

Flame flared his wings indignantly. "But Umber, she's being all annoying and smug!"

"Am not!" Kinkajou's righteous voice struck out. Flame glowered in her direction and Umber elbowed him in the ribs.

"What happened to the whole 'turning over a new leaf' thing?"

The red dragon's expression soured. He looked as if he wanted to take all the leaves of all the forests and burn them to a crisp. Taking off the stern expression Umber let his feature relax. He pressed his forehead against Flame's arm.

"Please? She's my friend, Flame. I don't want you two to hate each other."

Flame's expression was nothing but daggers for Kinkajou, but when he looked down at Umber the ice melted away like snow in spring. The longer he held Umber's gaze, the quicker the fight seemed to leave his body. His hackles lowered, ears flattened against his head in defeat. A saggy streak of smoke escaped his nose. "I'm being a stubborn idiot right now, aren't I?"

"Yes," Kinkajou hissed across the way.

"This is a private conversation! Buzz off!"

"Flame," Umber chided, nudging him in the arm again with his snout.

The SkyWing turned away, groaning and sighing and making a show out of giving in. "Fiiine. I'll guess I have to be the *mature* one here and apologize first."

The tension in the room slowly eased away. Sunny and Turtle looked perhaps even more relieved than Kinkajou.

"Thank you, Flame," Sunny said. "That's very big of you."

"I know I know." Flame blushed under the attention. He cleared his throat, a nervous tick. "So... anyway... Kinkajou."

"Yeah?"

"I'd like to apologize for how mean I was to you in the past. Uh, how did Starf put it...I had a lot of anger inside of me that was building up and causing me to lash out. It wasn't personal....and I'm sorry about taking your pineapple."

"Grapefruit."

"Whatever."

Kinkajou remained silent for a bit, but slowly, her bright yellow exterior returned and she smiled. "Aww, alright, you're forgiven."

She bounced over to him and Flame leaned away. "I can never stay mad at someone when they apologize...unless they did something SUPER terrible like destroy the world and kill everyone but you haven't done that so we're good."

"Uuuum...OK?" Flame said.

"Aaaaand," Kinkajou sighed and looked at her talons. "I guess it *was* pretty sloth-faced of me to barge down here accusing you of something you didn't do. So...I'm sorry." She peeked up and clasped her front talons together.

Flame shrugged indifferently, but Umber could see the burning of his eyes recede back to their normal smoldering orange. "S'fine. We're cool."

The RainWing seared pink with joy. "Awesome! Does that mean we're friends now?"

Flame frowned, shielding his eyes with his talon. "Let's not push it."

The friendship bonding moment was broken by the sounds of talons scratching on stones and tumbling rocks coming from the tunnel behind them.

"Oh for moons' sake, NOW what?" Flame growled.

Moments later a dusty-gold figure, Qibli, skidded down the steep slope. With talons clawing the ground he managed to stop himself before careening to the pile of rubble at the bottom. A stream of pebbles followed at his heels.

He glanced up and brightened. "Aha! Found them!"

Next came the slight body of Moon, except her descent wasn't nearly as controlled as Qibli's and she bowled into him. Luckily he was steady enough to catch her. They looked at each other and laughed before Qibli saw something behind Moon that made his face pale. He grabbed her and they jumped out of the way just as Peril appeared. Flames streaked the rocks as her talons dragged along the floor. She clambered down to join the others with a bare gin.

"What we miss? Did anyone get punched yet?" Her whole body had a faint glow to it that Umber hadn't noticed before in the sun. Her light joined that of the torches that Sunny was lighting around the room since it looked as if they wouldn't be leaving anytime soon.

"More friends of yours?" Flame's irked whisper felt hot against Umber's ear. Umber ducked his head and smiled innocently.

"Ha, maaaaaaaaybe. Really, they're nice dragons."

"Mhm," Flame merely responded.

"No one's getting punched," Sunny strode forward to greet the new arrivals. Umber admired how she didn't even flinch under Peril's burning gaze. Although, everything about Peril was burning so perhaps she had just gotten used to it.

Trailing behind came Kinkajou, her wings pumping in what might have been excitement and alarm. "I thought you guys were right behind me! What happened?"

"Oh, we took a wrong turn and ended up in a cave full of glow worms...which Peril then incinerated," the SandWing explained.

"By accident!" Peril said quickly. "I just stepped in the cave and *WOOSH*, fire everywhere! They didn't even TRY to not catch on fire! How could I – "

"It's OK, Peril. We know you didn't mean to," Moon calmed the SkyWing. "Qibli was just teasing you."

"They died in a blaze of glory. A true warrior's death," said Qibli. Peril, seeming to miss the sarcasm, gave an earnest nod of agreement.

Qibli turned to inspect the group seated at the bottom of the cave, intelligent eyes scanning every detail. "Based on the fact that you're all sitting here casually, I'm going to take a guess and assume Stonemover is alive and well," he deduced.

"Of course he is!" Flame snapped, pushing past Umber. "Why does everyone think I'm some sort of murderer?"

Peril snorted. "Well it's not like we had a good reason to think otherwise. The only thing I remember about you it how often you would shout death threats at dragons in the hallway. Take it from me, if you want to convince dragons you're not a death monster, that's *not* how you go about doing it."

"Oh that's rich coming from *you*." Flame's voice was like a rusted blade against stone. "A literal murderer of hundreds of dragons giving advice to someone who's never killed anyone and the best part is *I'm* the only one getting judged for my mistakes! This is such *bullshit*."

"Flame!" Umber cried out in dismay, wondering if this was the last time he would get to see that obnoxiously handsome face before Peril melted it off.

But she didn't even move.

Instead her lip went taught in a puckered line. Steam curled around her horns and she looked like she wanted to say something but kept quiet.

Moon drifted away from Qibli's side to take a step towards the male SkyWing. "We didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Flame. We just – "

"Just wanted to save poor Stonemover from the terrible supervillain, right?" Flame snorted. "No, I get it. I was the bad guy in the past so OBVIOUSLY I'm still evil. Once a villain always a villain, right?"

With each accusatory question Moon seemed to sink further into the black darkness where the torches' light didn't reach, like a smudge of ink absorbed into coal. Or perhaps there was something in his mind that was making her uncomfortable. Umber, having kept his hold of the skyfire throughout this whole adventure, wondered if he should have lent it to Flame before his friends had arrived. It was too late now. He hoped whatever strongly worded thoughts were bouncing between those curled horns weren't too offensive.

But it was hard to focus on his friends when the dismal figure of Flame was staring him right in the face. Despite his previous

outburst the SkyWing's expression was rather...tired looking. Heavy lines bent his expression into one of hurt.

Flame had obviously been cut by his friends' actions.

This, of course, didn't pass Qibli's notice either. He exchanged an uneasy glance with Moon before carefully shuffling forward and clearing his throat. "I, uh, think we got off on the wrong talon here. Would you be willing to start over?"

Flame sniffed and sat down, his jaw clenched and unclenched periodically until finally he just shook his head, fed up. "Fine. Whatever. It's not like dragons are ever going to stop judging me; if not for my face then for my past. I might as well get used to it." His voice was limp like a whip but stung all the same.

Peril let out a *harrumph* of agreement, immediately blushing once she realized she had spoken aloud and then began to hum to make it seem that had been her plan all along. Turtle gave her a bemused look and she hummed louder.

Suddenly Kinkajou was in the middle of things, a bright neon beacon of heroic optimism. "Don't be so negative!" she ordered, appearing before Flame so violently he reeled back and tumbled into Umber. The MudWing propped him back on his talons with an encouraging pat.

"You can't let life get you down! You have to take it by the horns and make lemonade!"

Flame blinked. "I...what?"

Turtle waddled over to her and stage whispered, "I think you might have gotten a few idioms mixed up there..."

The RainWing wrinkled her snout in genuine confusion. "You think so?"

Umber smiled his amusement and leaned against Flame, reveling in the comfort of warm scales compared to the cool dampness around him. He wasn't sure where Kinkajou was going with that analogy, but he decided to use it as a string to connect own thoughts. "What

I *think* Kinkajou is trying to say is: you can't stop dragons from judging you, but you can decide to whether you're going to be bothered by it or not."

"Yeah, that's totally what I meant," Kinkajou said while nodding. Peril rolled her eyes skeptically.

"Well I *don't* care. It doesn't bother me," Flame snapped; the emotion in his voice indicating the contrary. Umber played along.

"I know it doesn't, but still, first impressions aren't everything. Just because someone sees you a certain way at first doesn't mean that's always how it will be. I mean, remember when we first met? You *terrified* me. But now look at us!"

"I'm pretty sure he terrified everyone," Kinkajou commented and was rewarded with a shush from Turtle.

Qibli's eyes glittered with curiosity that was layered over another emotion that reminded Umber of the way gators look at you when you get too close to their nest. "So does this mean we get to hear the romantic tale of how you two officially met?"

Flame snorted, a laugh like hiccups spread through his body. "Well I guess you could say it wasn't love at first sight, eh?"

Umber gave his own laugh of agreement. "But that's what I mean. We both made judgments about each other at first, but as we spent more time together we forgot all about them." He entwined his tail with Flame's. "I guess I'm just trying to say that, even if dragons judge you, that doesn't mean you can't change someone's mind later."

"Dragon's thoughts aren't just white and black," Moonwatcher spoke up, her soft expression brightening as she went. "They shift and change all the time, adapting to new information and feelings. Some dragons can be more stubborn than others, yes, but you'd be surprise how swiftly opinions can change. In fact, it's really interesting to watch a -uummm, I mean, it WOULD be really interesting to watch someone's thought processes change over time...but that's impossible...of course...heh."

Umber stole a panicked glanced over to Flame, who was watching Moon with a perturbed frown. Even though he felt bad about it, he knew it was not his place to tell Flame Moon's secret, although if Moon kept going on like she was he might figure it out on his own.

"That's real nice and warm and fuzzy and all," Peril spoke, the protest in her voice raw, "but YOU'VE never had dragons literally running away in terror from you when you walk into a room, or dive behind a rock when you pass by, OR hate you immediately on sight." Her talons were balled into fists that didn't quite match her defeated eyes.

"Sometimes no matter how hard you try, you'll always be a villain."

Umber saw Flame jolt as Peril used his words, a somber pensiveness weighing at his large red wings. Perhaps he was realizing how much they actually had in common, something that was dawning on Umber as well. This could have been wishful thinking on Umber's part, but he couldn't help but hope that the two would build a friendship someday. He was sure they could learn a lot from each other...if they could just get over their tempers first.

Her friends looked to her with sympathy, but it was Turtle who stepped forward. He patted her shoulder and Umber winced on his behalf. Even while knowing his scales were enchanted it still made Umber sickeningly worried to hear the SeaWing's skin sizzle

"You're not a villain, Peril. And neither is Flame." He gave a curt nod in the scarred dragon's direction. "Seriously, we've all seen what a REAL villain is like, and even in that case the lines were blurred."

Kinkajou wrinkled her snout. "Are we talking about who I *think* we're talking about? Because if we are, then I don't remember those lines being all *that* blurred. He was pretty much evil from day one. Just saying."

Turtle gave her a look, "You know what I mean. Not everyone is completely bad or good, and YOU, Peril, definitely have more good in you than bad."

The blazing dragon sat taller. "You think so?"

"For sure! You've change a lot, Peril and I'm really proud of you and everything you've done."

The heat in the room jumped significantly as red hues spread along Peril's face. Steam was shooting off her in thick streams; even the nearby lake was beginning to fog over, its top layer boiled to mist. "You're such a sap," she hissed through a barely concealed grin. "If you don't shut up I'm going to burn your face off."

Umber squeezed Flame's tail and brushed their wings together. "I know I've said it before, but I'm proud of you too, Flame."

Flame froze. "Oh *no*. This is *not* happening. I refuse to be part of this magical friendship circle of feelings!" He looked around in search of Sunny, finding her sitting a respectful distance away on a nearby rock. "This was your plan all along, wasn't it?" He accused. "I don't know how you tricked me into this hug-fest but I want out!"

Sunny neither confirmed nor denied his accusation, though her overly innocent shrug certainly didn't fool anyone.

"I don't think any of us ever had the choice," Turtle half-joked.

"Hey, while we're still on the topic of embarrassing our friends, I want to hear the story of how you two met at the Healing Center," Qibli said.

Umber and Flame exchanged a look.

"Yeah! Tell us! Please please please?" Kinkajou clasped her talons together. Her eyes glistened with dreamy visions. "Was it wonderful and magical and everything you hoped it would be?"

Flame's sharp bark of laughter was answer enough. Umber gave him a side-long glance. "Do you want to tell it or should I?" He asked.

Flame shrugged. "It's not much of a story. I was reading in the garden when sweet, innocent Umber came along, being the jolly wholesome soul that he is, to say hello to me. I, being an enormous butt-face, told him to, ahem, *frick* off, and thus began our steamy

affair. The end."

"Romantic," Peril commented dryly while Qibli looked not at all surprised.

"Oh...well I'm glad you two were able to get along despite the rough start." Moon smiled.

Kinkajou shook her head, her expression mystified. "So even after he was so mean to you, you *still* wanted to get to know him?"

Umber rocked back and forth on the heels of his talons, thinking back to that day, getting lost in the memories of that handsome face peering down at a scroll surrounded by fragrant lilacs. He smiled wistfully. "Ah, well, I don't know. There was just something about him that was kind of hard to stay away from..."

"He's talking, of course, about my irresistible bad-boy charm." Flame winked at Umber and turned him cherry red.

"I – shut up," he stammered.

Flame looked at him. "Wait, you mean I was right?"

"No!" Umber said quickly, but it was too late.

Flame threw his head back and laughed. "I can't believe you, sweet little Umber, have a thing for *bad-boys*." Cockiness bolded his shoulders and smirk. "So THAT'S why you like my scar, huh?"

Umber hid behind his talons, the redness spreading to his chest and ears. "Can we *please* talk about this later when were not in an underground cavern in front of my friends?"

"Yes, let's pleaaase continue this ABOVE ground and leave this gross damp cave." Peril curled her lips back in disgust as she stepped in a slimy puddle that sizzled away soon after. "It's like standing in someone's mouth."

Turtle's face wiggled and squirmed into an amalgamation of a grimace and frown. "Oh yuck. Why did you have to put that image in my head?"

The fiery dragon's grin became terrifyingly devious. "You think *that's* gross? Imagine that lake over there is a big pool of saliva."

Turtle made a gagging sound. "Peril, *stop*!"

"And the stalactites are drooling teeth – "

"SORRY I CAN'T HEAR YOU I'M GOING TO GO TALK WITH MY GOOD FRIEND UMBER NOW WHO DOESN'T TRY AND MAKE ME BARF OK BYE!" With an urgent gait the SeaWing left Perils side and hurried towards Umber. He gripped Umber arms weakly, his green scales looking extra green. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Flame leaned away. "Then be sick in the opposite direction."

"Flame!" Umber scolded, worried Turtle would be offended by the rude comment, but instead the glowing dragon just chuckled.

"I'll try but I won't make any promises."

Flame watched the SeaWing with a mixture of surprise and suspicion as if waiting for some bigger reaction. When none occurred he relaxed, although his tail twitched apprehensively.

His boyfriend's timid silence was a blaring trumpet for Umber. For all Flame's boastings and confidant façades, Umber knew he could be rather shy around strangers...especially one's he didn't intend on fighting.

"Flame, you've met Turtle before, right?" Umber asked, bridging the silence between them. "He was one of my best friends while I went here AND he's a super amazing hero that saved the world from Darkstalker!"

"Like I said before, all I really did was enchant a stick."

The SkyWing's talons softly scrapped the ground nervously but he leaned forward, intrigue swelling in his hushed whisper. "So it's true. You are an animus. That's what Sunny said anyway."

"Yep, that's me! Mr. Magical-talons right here! Enchanter of sticks, rocks, and bowls." Turtle gave a soft grin that plumped up his

cheeks.

The smile seemed to cast a shadow of recognition over Flame's features. He inspected the dragon before him. "You wouldn't happen to be related to someone named Starfish, would you?"

Turtle shrugged. "I dunno. None of my brothers have that name. Is he royalty?"

Flame's lips vibrated as he blew a gust of air through them. "He's a royal pain in my ass but I don't think that counts."

Kinkajou gasped in dismay. She materialized behind Turtle in a flash of orange and clapped her talons over his ears. "Flame! Language!"

"Oh come on!" Flame flared his wings. "You mean I can't even say a– "

"SHHHHH!" Kinkajou flopped her tail across his mouth.

Flame knocked her tail away, smoke coiled from the corner of his mouth. He locked his eyes with hers, took a breath, and spoke, "Ass" in one, even tone.

The last Umber saw of him, he had his head thrown back, laughing in maniacal glee as Kinkajou chased him back up the tunnel all while giving him the tongue lashing of a lifetime.

"I – uh – should we go after them?" Moon asked, her brow furrowed in concern.

"Probably," Umber confirmed with barely contained amusement.

"Uhh, FINALLY! I hate this place!" Peril roared, charging up the tunnel without even a glance backwards.

The remaining dragons met eyes and burst into a fit of giggles before, much more slowly, beginning their own trek up the mountain.

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By the time the small RainWing had finished her long and stern scolding the rest of the dragons had emerged from the cave system. While Sunny went to find his mother and Starf, Flame spent the time waiting with Umber and his friends. At this hour of the evening classes were over so they decided to head to the *library* of all places to hang out in some study room. It sounded pretty lame but Flame tagged along anyway at Umber's request. It was hard to deny the MudWing's big, pleading brown eyes and cute little pout.

As much as Flame tried to sit on the outskirts of the group, they always seemed to swallow him up until he was at the center of things.

It's not that he hated them...at least not anymore. They were still annoying for sure, but the main source of Flame's discomfort was that he had never really been one for crowds. He could handle a few dragons at a time at most. Any more than that made his brain groggy and slow and strained his attention.

The small NightWing would sometimes approach him, wings tucked back timidly. She would offer him a shy smile and polite conversation which he tried to maintain with no small amount of struggle. Seriously, she was so soft looking he was terrified something obscene would go flying out of his mouth to smack her across the face and send her fleeing. Normally he wouldn't care to monitor his language, but these were Umber's friends and he was TRYING to behave himself...also he was worried Kinkajou might chase him down again.

The RainWing in question was standing nearby; in fact she was practically stepping on his talons. Ever since his apology she had seemingly adopted him as one of her own, treating him like he had always been part of their group. She teased him, joked with him, and told him every single one of her favourite fruits all while melting his eye-sockets out in a display of vibrant colours.

A few steps away the SandWing - Quincy or Quarry or whatever his name was, Flame hadn't really been paying attention – was telling some funny story to Umber about how Turtle had fallen asleep in a lake and caused a school-wide panic. The chubby SeaWing was laughing alongside his friends, his calm aura keeping the

conversation relaxed and fun.

Flame wasn't sure what to make of the SandWing. Despite the apparent amends made there was still a tension felt. It showed itself whenever the freckled dragon asked about his and Umber's relationship or saw them sitting together. A stiff voice or cautious glare. Not to mention he kept glancing over at Flame. From the corner of his vision Flame would see the glitter of black eyes turned his way, but by the time Flame looked up the SandWing had gone back to telling the story. Flame clenched his jaw. If the sand-snorter had something to say then just say it!

Turtle, though, Flame liked. He was so unassuming and relaxed it was hard to dislike him. Likewise, it hadn't escaped Flame's notice that it was SeaWing that had first arrived with Umber and had NOT assumed he was a killer right off the bat. He also kind of resembled Starf, but Flame wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Did all SeaWing's have that obnoxiously cheerful smile or was it like every one dragon out of a hundred? Either way it both comforted and annoyed him.

Peril was...something new. No matter how the conversation groups shifted they always ended up on opposite ends, both trying to keep to the edges of the crowd. Of course, it was just his luck (or some cruel twist of irony) that he had found something in common with the furiously scorching dragon. Having questionable pasts full of violence tends to bring dragons together for some reason. In the end, all they wanted was to move forward with their lives. As frustrating as it was, and despite all the terrible things she did, Flame could no longer bring himself to hate her knowing they shared a common struggle, and the way Peril kept glancing at him with strangled curiosity rather than burning resentment made him believe she was thinking the same thing.

But he could never imagine himself actually being good friends with Peril. Could he? They were both too aggressive, stubborn, and hot-tempered which meant they would either be bosom buddies or he would end up a sad pile of ash after she incinerated him.

Just as Qimbo and Kinkajou were finishing up their respective stories, Sunny's polite knock sounded against the doorframe. Rinsed

with relief Flame rushed out of the overcrowded room to the familiar faces of his Healer and his mother. Avalanche reached for him immediately, checking him over for injuries or damage before squeezing him tightly in her wings.

"Thank the Moons you're alright! I nearly tore this place apart when you disappeared." She released him and he sucked in a breath.

"Actually she nearly tore ME apart, but anyway, that's not important," Starfish added with a flick of his talon. He patted Flame on the back. "So how did it go?"

Flame, in a masterful display of vivid storytelling, merely shrugged. "It was fine, I was able to get his forgiveness and he apologized to me and stuff, so that was nice," he offered feebly. He was still making sense of everything that had happened, all the feelings spinning around in his brain and chest. It was a lot to take in. Starf seemed to understand this and gave him another gentle pat.

"Yes, everything worked out wonderfully!" Sunny added, joining the small group. "I think Flame really opened my father's eyes about a lot of stuff and learned some things himself at the same time." She winked at him.

His mother beamed. "I'm so proud of you my brave little dragon." She turned to Starf with the smuggest of grins. "See, I knew everything would work out."

Starf recoiled in frustrated confusion. "What are you talking about? I never had any doubts that Flame would succeed."

"Yeah, but it was MY idea to bring him here in the first place. So I was right."

Starfish remained silent but his gills pulsed rapidly. Flame stifled a scoff. He'd forgotten how hilarious it was to watch them argue.

Sunny smoothed over the tension like butter on toast. "In fact, Flame brought up a really great idea while we were all talking, but in order for it to work we might need your help, Starfish."

The SeaWing cocked his head. "Oh?"

Sunny met his eyes and Flame knew what she meant. He gave her a small nod and turned to his Healer. "When I was down there talking to Stonemover I learned a lot about him and the idea of him going to the Healing Center came up. I did my best to explain the place but you'd probably be better at it." He rubbed his arm. "All I know is he needs help. The kind you give me. Do you think you'd be able to talk to him?"

Flame gave a nervous gulp. Starf looked exhausted for sure. Would he be up for doing this additional favour?

But, of course, Starf gave a warm smile. "I'd be happy to help."

"I can take you down to see him after I give you the tour if you like," Sunny offered helpfully. She laughed sheepishly. "In fact, we should probably start that tour soon if you want to leave before midnight."

Indeed, the dim light entering through the skylights indicated that the day was running out. With a jolt Starf nodded and motioned for Sunny to lead the way. He looked over his shoulders at the SkyWings. "Will you two be joining us?"

In sync Avalanche and Flame vigorously refused. Flame had had enough of tunnels and mountains, and he had a feeling his mother had had enough of Starfish.

"Very well, I'll see you later." He paused in his steps and turned around once more. "Oh! And don't worry about waiting for me. If you want to return to the Healing Center then go ahead. Who knows how long I'll be here and I can find my own way back." He smiled and turned away for real this time and followed the animated Sunny through the library, the two of them chirping like birds. No doubt Sunny was eager to share her idea of the whole counsellors project she had discussed with Flame earlier.

Flame turned to his mother who finally seemed at ease now that it was just the two of them. He allowed himself wry smile. "So...what do you wanna do?"

Avalanche raised a critical brow. "Well you look absolutely

exhausted. If anything I would suggest we head back while you still have the energy to fly.

He puffed out his chest indignantly. "I'm not tired!" But that was a lie. Already he felt his thoughts becoming fuzzy and unfocused like they were being pulled away bit by bit from his conscious mind. Confronting Stonemover had been draining, but trying to maintain civil conversations with a bunch of Umber's friends had really zapped him dry. He slouched, his head feeling full of stones. "Not *physically* tired anyway. At least not yet."

A warm wing wrapped around his body. Flame leaned his head against his mother's chest as she pulled him close. "Let's head back then before the rest of your energy goes too, hmm?"

Flame considered protesting, but stopped when he noticed the weary droop of his mother's wings and the drained colour of her face. She was exhausted as well. No doubt being gravid had a part to play in it, but it was evident she wanted to leave while *she* still had the energy.

He relented. "Yeah, OK. Lemme just tell Umber I'm leaving first."

Flame ducked beneath his mother's wing and made his way back to the study room, wondering how the hell he was going to extract Umber from his swarm of friends without causing a fuss. Luckily he wouldn't have to. Umber was leaning against the door frame waiting for him. They greeted each other with an affectionate nuzzle.

"Are you heading back now?" Umber asked.

"I think so. You coming?"

The MudWing ducked his head, his speech coming out in hurried bursts. "Would...would you be mad at me if I wanted to stay here a few days? I didn't get much time to see my brothers so I was hoping to get some time with them tomorrow. I – I promise I'll be back soon though!"

Flame had to chuckle at Umber's painfully worried expression.

"Why would I be mad? I figured you'd want to see your brothers before you left." He paused, an uncomfortable feeling tugging at his heart. "Did you honestly think I would be angry at you for that?"

"No! I – I just – I don't know." He hung his head. "I guess I've been feeling bad all day about leaving you to hang out with my friends. I should have been there for you, you know? Instead I was goofing off like a fox in mud. What if you needed me? What if something had happened to you? What if – "

Flame couldn't handle the self-deprecating sneer on Umber's face. Swiftly he lunged forward and caught Umber's lips with his own. The MudWing gave a muffled yelp of surprise but quickly relaxed, his form melting into Flame's. When he pulled away Umber was still leaning against him, his face a blissful revere. "Honestly, you worry too much," Flame said.

Umber touched their noses together. "Actually you're the one that worries too much, remember?"

Flame's whole body felt washed in starlight. It alleviated some of the exhaustion. He nuzzled him back. "*Actually* I'm pretty sure you worry more, but for the sake of keeping peace I'll pretend to agree. Also you're too cute to argue with."

This made Umber release a wonderful little squeak.

"Get a room you two!" Peril loudly called from within the room. It was quickly followed by wave of hushes and shushes. Umber and Flame turned scarlet with mortification. They had completely forgotten about the others in the room behind them.

The jumped apart like pieces of a shattered plate.

Flame cleared his throat. "Aha, um, anyway – I'll see you later, OK?"

Umber nodded. "Would you tell Sora I'll be back in a few days? I don't want her to be anxious."

"Sure. Of course."

The two males sat silent for several moments, both knowing what

they wanted but still too embarrassed to go through with it.

"Just kiss him already you melon-brain!" Kinkajou shouted and Flame had a feeling that particular order was directed at him. With this bit of encouragement Flame banished all hesitation from his mind, leaned forward, and kissed his boyfriend farewell. Afterwards he quickly snaked away, just as the predicted whistles and teasing cheers poured out of the adjoining room. Suddenly Flame was VERY glad to be leaving.

That was, until a voice called him back.

"Flame, wait up!"

It was the Quiche guy. He stepped forward out of the room, his mouth teased into an easy smile. The scar along his muzzle (which Flame considered fairly wimpy looking compared to his own. Seriously it was barely a scratch) folding along itself to accommodate the grin.

Just by looking at him there was nothing alarming, except that his voice held a crisp edge to it like the first winds of autumn. "You have a minute?"

Flame hesitated. He turned around to check what his mother was doing. She was perusing the stacks of scrolls, not yet aware he was finished speaking with Umber. She didn't seem to be rushing him out the door so he figured he still had some time.

"Suuuuure?" Flame answered, his curiosity piqued. Well, more like a sprinkle of curiosity in an ocean of apprehension. What did this guy want? Was he looking for a fight? It didn't seem like it but, then again, Flame had never really been good at reading dragons like Umber.

Against his better judgement he let the SandWing lead him to a quieter area out of view from the main library chamber, a pocket of space between scroll-shelves. He sat down on a furry rug laid on the floor where Flame joined him, still wary but willing to listen.

"So..." Flame said, fighting the urge to start clawing nervously at the

rug. It was hard to sit still when it felt like he was being picked apart and analysed from every angle by those quick black eyes.

"So..." Qibli – Flame finally remembered – echoed. He rubbed his arm and sighed. "Look, I just wanted to clear the air before you leave. I think we can both agree that, for Umber's sake, we should make the effort."

Flame nodded, still not quite sure where he was going with this. "OK, but what's there to clear up?"

"To start, I *do* feel really bad about earlier today." He ran his talons along the ridges on the back of his neck. "I'm usually not so quick to jump to conclusion," he paused, and, with a faint laugh added, "well, *usually* not. Seriously, I'm the guy that thinks everything through a billion times so I *know* I should have known better but..." Qibli shook his head, his ears flattening. "Anyway, I just wanted to let you know I'll try to get better at the whole thinking-things-through-and-not-acting-rash thing."

"Erm, OK," Flame said. He guessed he should probably say something like 'thank you' or 'don't worry about it' or 'hey that's a cool earring' but he was too busy being confused. If this guys was so clever then what had made him snap? Had it been something about Flame specifically? Was he *that* terrible that this guy had automatically assumed the worst?

"Then...what made you do it this time?" Flame asked. "Why'd you come running after me when you knew better?"

Qibli curled and uncurled his tail rhythmically in thought. "Honestly? I got overprotective of Umber." Flame blinked in surprise while the SandWing wrapped his tail into a firm knot. "He's a sweet guy and I good friend and – I – I just wanted to – " Qibli exhaled a long breath. "This is probably going to make me sound like a complete camel-faced jerk, but for my own peace of mind I have to know." He pinned Flame with his eyes, holding his gaze and not even blinking as he spoke: "You would never hurt Umber, right?"

"WHAT!?" Flame felt a snarl rise at the back of his throat. *Does this arrogant prick honestly think I would be* abusive*? What kind of*

monster *does he think I am?*

The fact that someone would actually think he'd be able to harm Umber pierced him. Like an arrow doused in oil, it penetrated his outer shell and flew into the furnace of his rage. It hurt and burned in a way that made him want to hurt and burn back. Fire licked the back of his throat in a temptation to bring this moon-forsaken library and the whole school down with it in a blaze of ash and glory.

But in an instant the strongest part of the impulse had passed, although the anger still raged. Now all Flame just had to keep holding it back until it smothered. Easier said than done.

Flame remembered Starf telling him what to do in such a situation, when this hateful anger that seared like acid in his brain appeared; an anger that ripped him apart from the inside until he let it out.

If he tried to hold it back it was just burst out, but if he let it take him over then it would wreaked havoc.

He had to let it go.

He imagined it like a surge of fire stampeding towards him, but instead allowing it to carry him away he simply noted it and let it by, ducking under like it was a wave passing overhead. Flame's whole body swayed as it vanished and trembling he swallowed the last bit of his fury. It tasted like bile.

He would not live up to Qibli's shitty expectations of him.

Flame cleared his throat, more to test his voice to make sure all filaments of anger had gone down. "You're right, you DO sound like a camel-faced jerk, and NO, I would NEVER EVER harm Umber. I can't believe you'd think that!"

The SandWing's earring flashed as he tugged at it with his talons. "I'm sorry I had to ask that question but... Umber's really important to me." He looked at the floor. "I needed to know he was in good talons."

Flame ground his jaw but couldn't muster any more anger to be

annoyed with the guy. And in all honesty, he couldn't really fault Qibli for being worried. Sure, it was fucking rude but hadn't his mother accused Umber more-or-less of the same thing? Not the ABUSIVE part of course, but she had threatened him with violence if he broke Flame's heart.

Whether Flame liked it or not, he was going to have to share Umber. He couldn't mouse him away and keep him for himself. No, if he wanted to be with Umber he would have to deal with all the *other* dragons that cared for him.

A price he was more than willing to pay.

"He's important to me too," Flame said in a hushed voice. He had meant to say it louder but his voice seemed to be getting all gross and gunky with emotion. "And I would never let *anything* harm him. I promise."

The sand dragon looked up, observed him for several heart-beats, and then gave a wry smile. "Good."

The freckled dragon stood up, indicating the conversation had come to an end. "I should probably get back before the others organize a search party. Anyway...thanks for listening and stuff."

Flame stood as well and gave a curt nod of acknowledgement. "Sure."

"And for the record, I'm glad you're getting the help you need," Qibli said with an opened, honest face.

Flame nodded coolly again. He was sure the SandWing was being earnest, but the kind words fell flat after the previous accusation that still stung his insides. In that moment of annoyance he accidentally let slip: "Yeah, well, for the record my scar's cooler than yours."

As soon as the words left his mouth Flame seized up. He stared dumbfounded at the other dragon. *Welp, there I go again, ruining another chance at having one less person in the world hate me.*

Qibli's first reaction was to touch to his scar self-consciously but a

second later an amused snort escaped his nose. "Yeah, but if my scar was any bigger it would totally ruin my hunkiness to bad-boy ratio that I've been working so hard on!" To illustrate he struck a handsome pose with his chest and chin jutting out, his lips puckered like it was their moon-given right to be kissed.

Flame didn't want a laugh but a chortle escaped his nose before he could hold it in. Then he was laughing.

Stupid Qibli and his funny jokes.

Qibli's own laugh joined his and the tension curled away like smoke from a candle wick. The SandWing extended his talon and offered it to Flame. "See you around?"

Flame glanced at the outstretched palm and hesitated for a moment before grasping it. He gave it a firm shake, managing a weak smile while doing so. "Yeah. See you around."

Silently the two left the alcove between the shelves, Qibli returning to join the others and Flame approaching his mother. When he entered her field of vision she put down the scroll in her talons. "Well, everything settled?"

Flame nodded. Despite the tired fuzz collecting on his brain like moss he felt...tranquil. His conversation with Qibli moments ago was already fading to the back of his mind, mixing with the other currents and streams that were his memories of today.

It had been one hell of a day.

This morning he had been trembling, teeth-clattering, writhing ball of anxiety, but now he felt taller than a mountain and light as air.

He had entered the pit of his fears, faced his demons, and in the end had befriended them. Returning to the school itself hadn't been easy either. It was like a living memory book of his lowest point, but he had walked these halls once again and now emerged with his head held high. He had even upheld a conversation with several dragons at once and NONE of them had tried to punch him!

All in all, it was definitely a story worthy of a graphicoll.

But that would have to wait for now. There was still one last journey to take.

Flame brushed his wings against his mother's side. "Yeah. Let's go home."

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As the sun dipped in the sky, casting glowing hallows around the mountain's peak, Flame and Avalanche took to the skies. Their large wings carved into the wind, greeting each turbulent lift and rotor with supple familiarity that extended beyond basic knowledge of flight. For SkyWings the wind was family, every breeze a brother and each gale a sister that pulled at your wings and nagged you to play.

It filled Flame's body with zinging energy as he circled the summit alongside his mother before they adjusted course to take them back to the Healing Center. On the ground summer still held rule with its hot breezes shaking the lush trees and wild grasses that filled the valleys between the mountains, but up above the clouds Flame could smell the first cool whispers of autumn hiding in the winds. The promise of another adventure.

Flame's sensitive wings felt a spiral of tumulus wind nearby as it peeled away from the mountain. He smiled deviously and called to his mother, "Mom! Watch this!" He dove into the twisting ball of air and slammed his wings against his body. Using his momentum and the wind to keep aloft he spun twice then flung his wings back open.

He looked back at Avalanche, beaming. To his surprise his mother wore the same deviously mischievous grin as he was. "Nice, but watch THIS," she said.

Avalanche found her own ball of twisting wind and did a QUADRUPLE spin before splaying her wings open, somersaulting twice, and serenely soaring back to him with a smug expression.

Flame snorted. "Show off!"
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She laughed and wing-checked him, using the time it took to correct himself to zoom away. "You'll never catch meeee!!" She bellowed.

"OH YES I WILL!" He returned, wings pumping in sweeping arcs.

The two played like this until, all too soon, the first glimpses of the SkyWing capitol city came into view. By now, the sun was but a strand of flaming silk along the horizon. The first eager stars fought to outshine the dwindling sunlight just as the Healing Center's white columns and domes became visible.

His whole body shuddered in relief as of saying 'ah, we're home.'

"Flame," his mother said, breaking the long-running silence that had grasped them since entering the region. "I'll fly with you to your room but I can't stay. I must return to Possibility tonight."

It was another hour's flight to Possibility on top of the several hours they'd already been flying. Why was she in such a rush to get back? "Did you leave the oven on or something?" He asked.

She laughed but shook her head. "No, it's the egg." She placed a talon over the bulge in her mid-section. "I feel it coming, and soon. Maybe even tonight. I need to get back to the nest."

Flame's eyes widened. "Oh. Sure. Yeah. Do what you gotta do," he pipped. He kept forgetting about the egg, or rather, that it was an actual thing in reality with consequences and that he would eventually have a real living, breathing sibling. Did it hurt to lay an egg? Probably. Was she in pain now? She didn't seem to be bothered by it but then again this was *way* out of his shallow bowl of understanding.

He decided to file all those thoughts away for now. He was too tired for that crap.

They began to circle down in the center of the gardens near the West-most building where Flame's room was located. His talons brushed the soft grass while the nearby fountain gurgled in welcome. At this hour only a few dragons lingered among the

plants, mostly just the gardeners cleaning up or the other custodians lighting the lamps that lined the walkways.

Avalanche brushed her wings against her son's and he looked up at her. "But don't worry," she said. "I'll be back as soon as the egg is safe. I've been carrying it around for a month so I know Shrimp won't mind watching it while I'm gone."

As they walked into the West-most building Flame's lips curled back in something of a distasteful grimace.

Shrimp.

He had no idea who this guy was but already his name implied he was a total tool.

"Am I ever going to get to meet this guy?" Flame asked as they stopped outside his door.

His mother sighed. "Someday, yes, but for now let's just take one thing at a time." She pulled him into a hug and kissed the center of his forehead. "I'll see you soon, and for Moons' sake, *please* stay out of trouble while I'm away."

Flame feint disappointment. "Aww. So no more starting fights?"

"Absolutely not."

"No more sneaking away after dark?"

"No."

"No more throwing cake at rich dragons?"

"N – wait, what?"

"Oh, uh, ha, that was just a joke..."

Flame held his breath while his mother stared him down using her most powerful 'I know you're lying but we'll talk about this later' glare. The one every mother knows.

At length she sighed and shook her head, giving his forehead one last kiss. "I love you. Take care," she said before turning away.

Flame watched her go, not taking his eyes off her glowing red scales until she was swallowed by the clouds. Suddenly everything felt heavy, like he had been filled with lead.

He dragged his talons back to his room and flopped down in his bed, the mattress bouncing from the impact. He turned over on his back and stared up at the ceiling, feeling content but also a little lonely.

He missed Umber and his mother already, but it was only a superficial pain. He knew he would see them again shortly and the feeling brought a wide grin to his face.

Starf would probably be back tomorrow, and Flame could always hang out with Sora and Jet until Umber returned. Hell, maybe he'd even see what Berg was up to.

He didn't want to brag or anything, but even *he* had to admit it was impressive how many friends he had collected is such a short amount of time.

Friends that actually liked him; who didn't want him to pretend to be someone else.

That cared for him and worried about him and, in some cases, maybe even...loved him.

Flame smiled to himself.

For the longest time he had thought he was a dragon not worth loving.

Disfigured and discarded, he had held that hate in his heart, nurtured it, and fed it with his rage until it had nearly devoured him. Sometimes he still felt it. Like a shadow lurking at his every step, waiting to pull him under and carve him out. It would whisper taunts in his ear like a spider building a web one sticky strand at a time.

Sometimes he would get stuck in the web, but other days he could wiggle and squirm away, and recently, those escape days were becoming more frequent.

Even if *everybody* didn't love him (or even like him), that was fine. He didn't need the world's love.

He had Umber's laugh, Starf's encouraging smile, and his mother's hugs.

He had all the love he needed.

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Important author's note:

The next and final update I post will be the epilogue.

Of course, while I have no doubt I could continue Healed for another 100 chapters (Flame, Umber, and Sora still have a long ways to go), I will be starting back to school soon and have other projects I've been neglecting, so I think it's time I shifted my focus.

That being said, I will still be posting one-shots and mini-series based in the Healed AU, so keep an eye out for those!

The epilogue will be posted soon which will also have a longer and sappier author's note.

Thank you for all the support and see you again soon!
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Epilogue

One year later

Sitting in the gardens Umber had to tightly grip that scroll in his talons as a gruff wind blew by. It passed in an instant, leaving the fragrant smell of wild roses in its wake to tickle Umber's nose. He sniffled back a sneeze and let himself relax once the tingling stopped. Sora, however, fell victim to the wind's tricks and released a series of squeaky sneezes, much to Umber's amusement.

Hiding from the heat of the mid-day sun, the sibs were resting beneath the golden foliage of a yellow elm while reading. Yes, reading. Umber had finally learned to read over the past year, even if he wasn't a pro at it yet. The scroll he currently held in his claws was meant for a much younger audience, but it was just perfect for his skill level. Sora was, of course, reading a much fancier scroll of poetry and other fancily worded things.

They had begun their morning in the library, but on a warm, sunny day like today it was impossible to resist the gardens which were crowded with dragons with the same idea. Most, like Umber, had found a comfortable spot to sit and relax, but there were scores of others walking around to admire the plants or chatting with friends. On the far side of the garden Umber could see his own friend, and, as of several months ago, Sora's now girlfriend, Jet, leading one of her tours through the facility. A few meters away to the left Umber recognized Berg, Flame's IceWing friend, as he watered a bed of long-stemmed lilies. He wasn't sure how close they *actually* were; only that Flame had insisted they were friends so Umber wasn't going to argue. They apparently hung out whenever Flame helped out in the gardens, which wasn't very often since most of the SkyWing's time was sucked up in the kitchens.

In fact, the SkyWing had been helping out in the kitchen so often that the head cook had taken him on as an apprentice. In addition to being trained it was also somewhat of a part-time job, so the

scarred dragon was making a little money as well...that went directly to buying more graphicolls and whatever treat he was currently obsessed with. At the moment it was fig tarts.

Umber's ears flicked as a group of several RainWings loudly walked through the gardens, their voices carried by another burst of wind. Umber watched the living mosaics join up with a band of ebony-clad NightWings lounging by the fountain and felt content.

Flame's new job wasn't the only thing that had changed. The Healing Center itself had grown dramatically in just the past few months. After the success of the first year, news of the Center had become wide spread and dragons had come from all corners of Pyrrhia. More patients had arrived, yes, but so too had doctors and volunteers looking to help in any way they could. In addition to the SkyWings there were now a variety of dragons cleaning hallways, setting up activities, and just generally keeping the place running.

It was refreshing, and in a way, Umber felt like he was back at Jade Mountain Academy in those first early days where he had been in awe of all the strange, new dragons around him.

Umber was jolted from his thoughts at the sound of a dragonet laughing. He looked up from his scroll to see a particularly handsome SkyWing was making a scene.

A dozen or so dragon-lengths away, in a small area free of flower beds or trees, Flame sat before a stout little dragonet with shimmering scales that were a blend of deep blues, purples, and reds.

That dragonet was Chromis, Flame's half-brother. Just emerged from his egg the week before, this was the little dragon's first visit away from the nest and the small hybrid had been so excited to meet his big brother he could hardly keep his wings and tail from flopping around – or maybe that was just from lack of coordination. He had the lean body of a SkyWing, but his legs where thick and short like his SeaWing father and small webs ran between his talons.

His whole body was wiggling as Flame held a whicker ball before

him. It was a gusty day but the short respite from the wind allowed the brothers' conversation to reach Umber's ears.

"Are you listening, Chro?" Flame asked, using the nickname he'd given the hybrid. "This is super important and I want you to focus. OK, so, you see this ball?" He held out the toy and Chromis nodded, his wide eyes, the same rusty orange as Flame's, narrowing into a scrunched up face of concentration as his listened to his big brother's very important instructions.

"Good. Now, I'm going to throw it and I want you to try and catch it, then throw it back to me. Got it?"

The dragonet stomped all his little feet in anticipation. "YES! I READY!" he yelled with his whole body as it continued to move and dance as if possessed. If Umber had to read the look on Flame's face, he would guess the SkyWing was wondering how the heck something hardly larger than his talon could be so aggressively energetic.

Umber shook his head with a smile. Flame had no idea what he was getting himself into.

Looking more than a little hesitant, Flame took a few steps back and prepared himself to throw. "OK, here it comes." With the smallest of tosses Flame sent the ball flying in a narrow arch that would have landed a mere several feet away. Chromis watched this unfold like his life depended on it, his quivering eyes never once leaving the ball as it came closer and closer, but just before Chromis caught it the wind flew by and snatched it away, carrying it several meters off.

"I'll get it," Flame said and started towards the ball but Chromis stopped him by pouncing on his talons.

"No! Me! I get!"

Swiftly he waddled away like a penguin on a mission, the semi-functional glow-scales running along his neck and back giving little bursts of light with each determined step.

Umber watched the hatchling run up to the ball, his gate slowing as he drew near, but paused. Something in the distance had stolen away the dragonet's attention. Completely forgetting the ball the hatchling shot right past it like an arrow flying from a quiver.

"Chro! Where are you going?" Flame shouted, but by the time he realized what was happening it was too late.

Chromis had spotted a fountain.

If there was one thing Umber had learned about the little dragon since he had met him this morning it was that, if there was any sort of body of water nearby, then you could bet your best wing he would find a way to get in it. And that's exactly what he was doing now.

Luckily (for Chromis, not so much for Flame) the fountain's ledge was low. Chromis latched his front claws over the lip and swung his back leg up, just barely catching the ledge with his foot. He pulled himself up, rolled over the rim, and fell into the water with a soft *plunk*.

"Fffffffffishcakes!" Flame hissed and bolted towards the fountain.

Umber emitted a chuckle and even Sora giggled as Flame's voice rang out. One of the rules Avalanche had set down before bringing Chromis to meet Flame was that the young SkyWing had to clean up his mouth. The results were a very frustrated Flame and a highly amused everyone else.

Umber watched through eyes soaked from laughter as Flame ran around the fountain, his talons splashing in the water trying to grasp the slippery dragonet only for Chromis to quickly dart away before Flame could reached him.

More colourful yet hatchling-appropriate curses came from the SkyWing before he, too, was in the fountain, flailing around in the shallow bath with water sloshing over the fountain's lip in large gulps. Chromis' delighted shrieks reached Umber's ears and all those within hearing radius, which included a particularly odd pair of dragons resting in the shade of the next tree over. One of the

dragons was Avalanche, her eyes flipping open at the sound.

She lifted her head from where it had been resting on her talons, her neck craning high. "I think I hear my sons screaming. Should I do something?" she asked the SeaWing, named Shrimp, resting at her side. The SeaWing had a muscular build that was covered with grass-green scales. His jaw, while well defined, was also crooked. It jutted violently to the left and while it didn't affect his speech much it did make chewing rather troublesome. He had been more than happy, and even a little insistent, to tell Umber the story of how he had apparently broken it as a hatchling and it had never properly healed.

Shrimp didn't look up as he continued to fuss with the messy flower-crown he was assembling from white daisies. "Depends. Are they dying or being horribly mangled?"

Avalanche squinted, still watching the fountain. "No. They're just defacing public property and disturbing the peace."

The male chuckled. "That's all? I'm sure they'll be fine. Now, stay *absolutely still*." Carefully lifting the barely-held-together crown, he slowly lowered it onto Avalanche's head as if it were the final touch on a masterpiece. "There." He dusted his talons together, admiring the result. "Beautiful as a string of pearls. Now, just don't move ever again."

But she did move. Avalanche's ear twitched as a drooping flower brushed it and the crown of flowers disintegrated, the petals and leaves cascading over her head and unamused face.

Shrimp's shoulders slumped. "Hmm. Sorry, my love. I thought it would stay together that time." He quickly reached to pick the stray flowers from his mate's scales and horns, but she grabbed his wrist and pulled him in, landing a kiss on his cheek.

At that point Umber looked away, feeling embarrassed for having seen that. He tried to put all his focus back into his reading, but he did hear Avalanche say, "You're such a dork."

And Shrimp respond with, "A dork that always wins our sparing

matches, might I add."

Whatever rebuttal Avalanche had, Umber never heard. Stomping back towards them was a soggy, soaked, and deeply frowning Flame with a beaming, equally drenched, dragonet tucked under his wing like a sack of potatoes.

"Mama! Did you see? Did you see me!?" Chromis chirped. He wiggled out of Flame's grasp and ran to his mother's opened arms. She picked him up and nuzzled him before setting him back down and sternly reminding him that dragons do not belong in fountains. Meanwhile, Flame staggered over to Umber and collapsed at the MudWing's side, his gaze vacant and wide as if a deep understanding of some arcane truth had finally been realised.

"I don't think I could handle dragonets of my own," he finally rasped, droplets of water beading on his red scales.

Umber released a loud laugh. "Don't get ahead of yourself. I think you have a *looooooong* ways yet before becoming a father."

With the last of his energy Flame lifted his head towards Umber. "I can barely keep a plant alive. I don't think I can be trusted with anything more demanding than a cactus." His let his head drop back down and sighed as Chromis came galloping over. The only part of Flame's body low enough to climb was his face, so Chromis tossed himself atop Flame's head with gusto.

"We play?" he asked hopefully. Using Flame's lower lip as a step, the small dragon clambered onto Flame's face and began to paw his brother's cheek. "Flam play? he asked again, doing his best to shape out the sounds of Flame's name.

"How about a nap?" Flame offered instead. "Naps are good. We could just lay here and not move or talk."

But Chromis was already bored with the conversation and had begun to precariously scale Flame's body like a cat balancing on a railing...if that cat was a week old dragonet with the grace of a flailing octopus stuck in a tree.

Umber set his scroll down in preparation to catch the hatchling if need be, but Shrimp beat him to it. He snuck up on his son and plucked him off the weary SkyWing.

"Nooooo!" the hatchling wailed, but to no avail. Shrimp held the pouting dragonet up to his face.

"Let's have none of that now. You've been playing with Flame all day and run him ragged. It's time to go home.

"NOOOO!" he cried out again and tried to escape. "Flam! Help!"

Umber helped Flame to his feet and the red dragon gave a tired smile. "Sorry, Chro. Shrimp's word is law."

"Actually Avalanche's word is law. I'm just the messenger," Shrimp corrected and winked at his step-son. Flame responded in kind.

Flame and Shrimp's relationship had started off rather...rocky. They had officially met shortly after Chromis' egg had been laid and, while Flame hadn't been outright hostile, it had been obvious that Shrimp would have to earn the younger dragon's respect and approval.

In the end it was Shrimp's charismatic nature and obvious love of Avalanche that had earned him a spot in Flame's good books. The SeaWing was optimistic and kind, but had a no-nonsense streak about him. It was a sorry dragon indeed who thought he was just another cheery push-over.

And that was why he was completely immune to his son's pleading cries. "Daddy, I wanna stay! I wanna st – " Chromis' complains were cut off by a massive yawn.

"Yeah. That's what I thought," Shrimp quipped just as Avalanche approached. She turned her head to the sky, shielding her eyes with her wing.

"We should head back now if we want to get home by dinner," she said. "You know how Chromis gets when he misses dinner." Her and Shrimp exchanged fearful glances. Nodding in understanding, Shrimp wordlessly went to collect the hatchling-harness still laying

in the shade of the tree and prepared the dragonet to leave. Meanwhile Avalanche turned to her elder son.

"You look exhausted," she mused.

Flame snorted. "What a coincidence because that's exactly how I feel."

His mother laughed and pressed her snout to his forehead. "Thanks for watching Chromis for the day, we appreciated the break. See you again in a few weeks... assuming you've recovered by then."

Flame rolled his eyes. "I'll be fine. Really. Now go before Chromis escapes his bindings and makes me play another round of tag."

Umber looked up to see Chromis was, indeed, bound. He was strapped to Shrimp's chest and was not happy about it at all. Avalanche gave her son a kiss on the forehead and directed a polite nod to Umber before turning away to join the others. They took off right there in the garden.

"BYE FLAM!" Chromis shouted from the air. Flame waved back with a smile as their forms were swallowed by the clouds. Once gone, he released all the air from his body in a long, shaky sigh.

"Avalanche was right, you *do* look pretty tired," Sora commented, her worried gaze trailing over Flame. "Maybe you should go lay down for a bit."

"Yeaaaah," Flame agreed. He rubbed the back of his neck, not out of nervousness but rather in a way that seemed to indicate it would be sore tomorrow. "I mean, it was fun playing with him but holy shit! I'm pooped!"

"Ah-ah, watch you're language," Umber teased and flicked his tail over Flame's snout. Flame made a lazy attempt to catch the tail with his teeth before Umber hastily pulled it away.

"Or what? You gonna stop me?" he challenged, the mischievous light of his eyes a dare. Heat rushed to Umber's face and chest while his heart thumped hard. His thoughts turned frisky.

"No, but I might *punish* you."

Umber took satisfaction as Flame took a step back, stunned, and then took even greater satisfaction at the excited growl the SkyWing returned.

"A*hem*!" Not so subtly Sora reminded them of her presence. Umber looked to the ground while Flame coughed is if the sound could hide the pink of his cheeks.

"Ahem, so, anyway," Flame began, "before I go pass out for the next ten days, I actually wanted to talk to you about something." His voice portrayed no emotion, but Umber could detect the faint wobble at its core.

Umber cocked his head. Whatever Flame wanted to discuss it would obviously important, so why was he trying to cover up his emotions? "OK, sure," Umber said and sat down. "What did you wanna talk about?"

Flame's gaze flickered to Sora. "Not now. Not here." He pointed with his tail to an area far past the garden's boundaries, where the river winded through the planes behind a thick wall of bulrushes. "Meet me by the riverbank over there at sunset."

Umber looked back at the spot Flame was pointing at. "Uh...OK? Buuut why are we meeting there?" But Flame never answered. Umber turned around just to see the SkyWing disappear behind a bed of begonias. He sighed.

"That was weird," he spoke to his sister, eager to talk about what could be going on. "Don't you think?"

Umber's suspicions snapped to attention when he saw Sora smile deviously as she struggled to focus on the scroll before her. His eyes slowly narrowed. "What do you know about this?"

Her claws gauged into the paper. "Nothing," she said quickly. Umber didn't buy it. He marched over and stood in front of her, peering down with his most interrogative stare.

"Really? Because that knowing smile tells me otherwise."

"I'm not smiling."

Umber pursed his lips. "Yes – yes you are. I'm looking right at you. I can *see* the smile."

Slowly she raised the scroll over her mouth, never breaking eye contact. "No you can't," she insisted, although it was more muffled this time. Umber could only laugh and shake his head.

Fine, he thought. *Whatever crazy scheme is going on here, I'll just let it happen. Besides, Sora is the master of secret-keeping. I'd be wasting my time.*

He picked up his scroll and laid back down, the soft grass felt cool on his underbelly. He tried to go back to reading but his mind kept drifting back to Flame.

What could he be up to this time?

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Flame was just cleaning up his workstation as the warm smell of brown-sugar filled his nose and mouth. The cookies would be ready any minute now.

Sore and tired as he was from his day with Chromis, Flame still had his duties in the kitchen to complete. The head chef kept him busy since he was technically an apprentice now or whatever.

Still, Flame couldn't complain (although he did anyway). He loved cooking so this was pretty much everything he had ever wanted, even if the head chef pushed him hard, he knew it was pay off in the end when he became the best chef in all Pyrrhia!

Maybe he'd start his own restaurant or something. Although he wasn't completely sure that's what he wanted. Having a restaurant meant owning a business and staying in one place and a lot of other boring stuff that came with it.

But, he had time to figure it out. For now, though, there were more pressing matters to attend to.
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Flame peek into the oven to see how his goods were faring. His expert cookie-analysing eye determined they were ready and he put on an oven mitt to take them out. While they cooled, he began to mentally prepare himself.

Today was the day.

He was ready for a serious relationship now and was going to ask Umber to be his official boyfriend. His heart thundered at the idea.

This past year had been one of the best in his life and Umber had played no small role in that happiness. Without his permission a smile crept along his mouth as he thought back on all they had done together. All the crazy shenanigans they'd gotten into and times they'd stayed up all night talking and the nights they had stayed up doing... *other* things.

Their relationship, while not perfect, had certainly grown stronger. Even while knowing this, it had still been a shock the day Flame came to understand just how strong his feelings for Umber were.

They had been sitting in Flame's room one autumn morning, tails entwined as the sun came in through the window to brush away the chill. Flame's head had been resting on Umber's chest as he listened to the MudWing ramble on about the different types of hot-leaf juice that he liked so much. Flame had looked up at Umber, ready to tease him about something, but was forced into silence as his breath was whisked away. The filtering sunglow on Umber's smiling face had set his soul spiraling into a blaze, as if the Universe had reach out and said *this is where you belong; this is where you've always belonged.*

At that moment he knew: he was in love with Umber.

And today, he was going to tell him so.

Umber had been so patient and supportive this past year, letting Flame develop himself and improve, not rushing their relationship or making Flame feel guilty for focusing on his problems first. He knew Umber would wait another ten years if Flame asked, but that wouldn't be necessary. Flame knew, in his own eyes, he would

never be good enough for Umber, but his heart had always belonged to the MudWing anyways, so it was about time he told him.

Finally, there would be no more uncertainty or guessing. No more awkward glances when dragons asked if they were dating or a couple. He was ready to make the commitment. Of course, he had connived with Jet and Sora about the most romantic way to go about it. The two females had sworn an oath to secrecy and had set Flame on the path of cheesy-romance-scroll level love confession.

Even if Umber was a big sap, Flame wasn't so sure he was *that* big of a sap. In the end Flame decided to just go with what he felt was right.

And sure, a confession by a riverbank at sunset *seemed* romantic, but it was the most private place he could think of, and the sunset part was to give him time to get his work done and finish the cookies which were, by now, perfectly cooled.

He carefully placed them into a small, cloth bag and tied a ribbon around the opening. It was almost sunset, but there was one other place he had to visit before seeing Umber. Deciding he'd clean up the rest of his mess later – if he remembered – Flame tucked the bag of cookies under his wing and left the kitchen.

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On the third floor of the Center Building, next to the cooking classroom where Flame had first baked that apple pie with Umber, was the art room. Inside he found just the dragon he was looking for: Stonemover.

The bedraggled NightWing had arrived just last month. It had taken nearly a year to convince the stubbornly terrified dragon to leave Jade Mountain, but after countless visits from Zephyr and Starf, as well as meetings with other animus and Sunny, they had managed to talk him into it; but it had come at a price.

He was no longer an animus. By his own talons he had removed his stone-scaled curse and then his own powers. It had been the only
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thing keeping him in his prison, and once free of his fear of becoming a monster, the trembling and weak NightWing had been carried out of the mountain after spending eight years in that cave.

Transporting him to the Healing Center had been no easy task either. Three dragons had been needed to carry the basket/ hammock thing with Stonemover inside, but now, he was here.

His lean body was hunched before an easel facing the window, the sun framing the shape of his back and limbs as Flame stuck his head through the door. He was painting the sunset, or trying to at least. The large dragon's limbs creaked and moaned like a dragon three times older. The SkyWing winced as Stonemover brought his paintbrush towards the canvas, his talons shaking violently; a side-effect of not using them for nearly a decade. With his other talon Stonemover grabbed his wrist to try and steady the brush, his brow furrowed in frustration, but before he touched the canvas a pair of lavender talons enfolded themselves around his claws, removing the brush from his hand.

The pair of talons had come from the RainWing sitting at his side whose name Flame could never remember. He knew it started with a 'B'...probably.

He DID know she was a new volunteer here and was some sort of dancer or something. That's was why she had been paired up with Stonemover, to help him regain coordination and strength...although the two had been spending a lot of time together outside of their strength training sessions.

"I think it's time for a break," she murmured, messaging circles into Stonemover's palm. Her voice was soft as petals with green eyes that warmed the room like a hearth. Flame watched the NightWing's tense shoulders relax and brow unfurrow. Flame figured if he wanted to talk to Stonemover he'd better say something now before things escalated past talon holding.

"Uh, hi here," he spoke up and walked into the room. The two dragons looked up and Stonemover smiled.

"Ah, Flame, good to see you," he welcomed and cleared off a nearby

chair that had his painting palate resting atop. He patted the seat. "Come. Sit. You can tell me about your day while I paint Pyrrhia's wobbliest sunset."

The RainWing tutted at the self-mocking comment. "Be *patient* with yourself. It takes time to heal. Plus, I doubt it helps that you're pushing yourself so hard. Just saying."

The NightWing curled his lips into a half-smile. He placed a handful of dirty paintbrushes into an even dirtier cup of water. "But I *want* to push myself. I want to expand my limits, to remember what it means to *live*." His voice bubbled with giddiness and the RainWing no longer seemed able to bring herself to argue. Instead she smiled wistfully.

"I'm actually on my way to do something, so I'll sit with you another time," Flame said. He took out the bag from under his wing. "I just wanted to drop off some cookies."

He knew Stonemover didn't need the cookies, but he guess he still felt bad about all the trouble he had caused the NightWing in the past. He just wanted the guy to know he was glad to have him here and that he wanted to be friends.

"Cookies?" The RainWing perked up, her eyes honing in on the bag like a hawk swooping down on its prey.

Stonemover chuckled and rested the tip of his tail on her shoulder. "Blossom, you've already had three pieces of cake today. Don't you think you maaaaaay be consuming a bit too much sugar? You'll get cavities."

She brushed off this tail and concerns. "Don't worry; I ate some vegetables today so I'm pretty sure it balances itself out."

Stonemover frowned. "Yes. Surely."

Flame withheld a smirk. Even though he could barely remember her name at times, he did recall seeing her around the grounds when she'd first arrived, lean as a willow branch. Now, after several months of filling up on breads, pastas, and sweets from the

cafeteria, her shape had filled out quite a bit.

Not that it mattered to her...or Stonemover.

The black dragon took the sag of sweets with a grateful bow. "Well, thank you for the treats. I'll make sure to have some before Blossom eats them all." He winked at the RainWing who pretended to be offended.

Flame couldn't stay long but he did engage in a polite amount of small-talk, inquiring about Sunny's visit a few days ago and how it had gone. Since the counsellor program at Jade Mountain had begun, the SandWing hybrid had become a frequent visitor to the Center, whenever she could get away from her teaching duties that is. She was here at least several times a month. Flame still felt super weird every time he ran into her in the hallways.

Seeing the sun touching the horizon through the window, Flame bid them a quick farewell and headed back downstairs to the cafeteria. He was glad Stonemover was settling in. Even though he hadn't been here long there had already been a major change to the NightWing's disposition. He hardly sighed at all now! And more often than not the old dragon could be found with a small smile plastered along his face rather than the previously common hopeless frown.

Of course, not that any of that surprised Flame. Obviously being outside in the sun and not in some dank old cave would improve anyone's mood.

The red dragon stepped onto the soft lawn of the gardens, picking through the lounging dragons, gardeners, and flower beds until he found a worn down path through the tall grass that lead to the riverbank.

His heart hiccupped at the sight of Umber sitting by the reeds, or rather, *among* the reeds. The smaller dragon had finagled himself into the tangle of plants and ferns that burrowed into the muddy banks, his own brown scales blending in perfectly with the fauna.

Flame let out a nasally laugh as he approached. "Trying to hide

from me, huh?"

The MudWing looked over his shoulder and grinned. With talons clumped in mud and muck he crawled up the slope to greet Flame.

"Well you weren't very specific when you said 'meet me at sunset', so I came early just in case and well, there was a bunch of mud and me, being a MudWing and all, I don't think I need to explain what happened next."

"Nah, I figured it out," Flame said. With a nudge of his wing Flame prompted Umber to follow him as they walked along the riverbank, tails twisted together.

Flame directed the conversation towards small talk. He asked about Umber's day and what he had done and if he was enjoying his scroll. Meanwhile his heart pounded in anticipation. He wanted to say it right now, but he had to wait. It needed to be said at just the right moment.

Flame figured he would know the moment when it came. Hopefully. Until then he just had to be patient, something Flame had never been all that good at. But as they continued their walk, an unexpected punch of nervousness hit his stomach. He slowly inhaled. *Be cool. Don't freak out. You've waited a year for this, what's five more minutes?* In the span of a few steps his stomach settled again and he breathed in relief before tuning back in to what Umber was saying.

"Sora and I got a letter from Clay today," Umber recounted to Flame. "He's been trying to get all the sibs together for a visit."

"Uh-huh. That's nice," Flame spoke. *Wait for the right time, don't mess this up! It has to be perfect! Just keep your cool and don't do anything dumb.*

"OH! Also, a new tea shop opened downtown!" Umber beamed. "They even had orange rooibos! Which is my favourite, so, of course, I bought a whole bunch and even got a discount – " Umber's sentence trailed away in his ears as Flame struggled more and more.

Keep it together, Flame! This needs to be romantic! The sun's nice and low. All I need to do now is figure out a way to ease the conversation towards a relevant topic...

" – and then I realized I had no place to put all the bags so I had to rearranged the WHOLE cabinet, but it turned out great because now everything is so neat and tidy and – "

"UMBER, I LOVE YOU!" Flame shouted, his words stumbling over each other in their race out of his lungs. All around the world stilled to silence. Umber's had stopped walking as well, his mouth frozen mid-speech, the amber flecks in his eyes shivering.

Flame blinked. *Well shit. Not exactly how I imaged it happening but might as well keep the momentum going.* He straightened his back, trying to channel the confidence that was quickly fleeting.

"I-I should have said it sooner but, you know, I suck at feelings and stuff." He watched Umber carefully as he spoke, not in fear of seeing hesitation or rejection or anything. He just wanted to savour this moment. He wanted every second woven into his mind in vivid detail like a tapestry. He took hold of Umber's mud-caked talons, the MudWing still watching him wordlessly. "I know it took me a while to get to his point, and even though I doubt I'll ever be good enough, I'm not going to make you wait around for me anymore. I *love* you, and I'm ready to be everything you want me to be." Flame took a breath. He brought his head forward and brushed his snout along Umber's jaw. "I'm ready for us to be mates or boyfriends or whatever you want to call it; just as long as we're together. That's the only thing I want."

A heartbeat of silence passed before the sound of choke sniffles began to escape Umber's throat. Flame reared back to see what was wrong and found the MudWing wiping tears from his eyes, a hard contrast to the heart-bursting smile that stretched his lips.

"You idiot," he laughed through the weak sobs. "You're so much more than good enough."

Love pooled in Flame's chest and overflowed to fill his whole body. He pulled Umber into a wing-tight hug, their snouts bumping

together until their foreheads touched. "You're such a sap, Umber. I didn't mean to make you cry." He kissed the MudWing's cheek and, feeling his own eyes begin to leak, tried to joke away the bursting tightness of his throat. "Also, since when do you call dragons idiots? Where did you learn such rude language?"

Umber cast his weepy eyes upwards to fix Flame with a not-so-subtle smirk. "Hmm, gee, I don't know. It's not like I spend the majority of my time with a dragon who knows more insults and swears than a SeaWing sailor or anything."

Flame decided to ignore the blatant accusation. "It's Jet, isn't it? She's a bad influence on you."

Umber had to push away from the hug as he doubled over into a fit of giggles. When he caught his breath, he reached out and pulled Flame's head towards his own in a kiss. But it didn't end there. Their bodies melting at the touch, they were soon knotted together on the ground as the space between them disappeared into heat and friction.

It continued to escalate until Flame won the dominate position, but that victory was short lived. Gasping for air the two had to break apart to catch their breath. Umber glowed blissfully beneath him; he shook his head and kissed Flame's snout. "How did I fall in love with such an idiot?"

Flame barked a laugh. "Great question. How *did* you fall for me?"

Umber's face turned wolfish. "Oh, maybe I'll tell you...if you can catch me."

Flame's brow creased. "But...I already have you – AAACK!" he shriek as a wad of mud connected with his temple. Umber wiggled out from beneath him, laughing maniacally. Without realizing it they had rolled closer to the riverbank and well into the mud and bulrushes. Flame scrambled to his feet as Umber darted away, gathering a hefty clump of mud in his talons while doing so. He chucked it at the fleeing MudWing only to have it miss completely, but that was a minimal detail. With his body brimming with mischief, and a grin that showed it, the SkyWing grabbed another

talon-full of mud and began his pursuit, but Umber was ready for him.

Before Flame could react another ball of mud hit him square in the chest. He narrowed his eyes. Oh, it was *on* now.

The war raged well after the sun was swallowed by the horizon and far into the night until finally, tired, breathless, and covered snout to tail in mud, they decided to call a truce.

The chill of the river alleviated some of their weariness as they paused to rinse off before making their way back, following the star-lit paths that whispered and shushed in the breeze. Umber went with Flame to his room and they collapsed in the bed. Umber fell asleep instantly, but Flame remained awake for a while longer, his mind buzzing like a fly stuck at a windowsill.

He thought of Chromis and his mother, of the several cakes he had to make tomorrow, of what he was going to get Starf for his birthday next week, but mostly his thoughts were tangled around the snoring dragon next to him.

He didn't know if he believed Umber when he had said Flame was good enough, but the words had given him hope. Right now he might not be, but, someday, he would. They had their whole lives ahead of them after all. Lives they would spend together doing lots of awesome things like cooking and fishing dragonets out of fountains and saving animus dragons and defeating the hordes of undead zombies brought to life by Lord Evil...

Even in his semi-lucid state Flame paused. That last one...didn't *quite* seem right and he was beginning to wonder if maybe he was getting a bit loony from exhaustion.

Sighing, Flame shuffled closer to Umber, draping a wing over his mate's bulky form. A rush of giddiness passed over him at the thought. His mate and boyfriend Umber. They were an official couple now! It made Flame's heart sing when he remembered how happy Umber had been this afternoon when he had told him. He played the scene over and over in his head. He would never get sick of it.

Although he still hadn't gotten that answer from Umber on how he had fallen for Flame, but maybe it didn't matter. He had Umber's love and promised to never take it for granted.

In fact, he had a lot of love in his life now, more than he would have ever imagined having over a year ago. Flame smiled at himself. The Flame he was a year ago would have called the Flame he was now a big, mushy looser. And Hell, maybe he was, but he was a *happy*, mushy looser.

As he ran past the memories of the day over and over again his heavy eyelids began to flutter close. The buzzing of his mind sputtered out and his senses honed in on Umber's steady breathing. In his final moments of consciousness he wrapped his body around Umber's, and then sleep took him, a smile still on his face as he dreamed of tomorrow and all the days to come.

THE END

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Author's Note:

You've reached the end! I just wanted to say thank you for reading my story! Weather you've been with me at each chapter post or have discovered this story long after it's been completed, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope you've enjoyed it.

(Below is me getting sappy so scroll down it you want, otherwise you're free to go)

So a year later and my first fanfiction is complete! (In one week's time it would have been exactly one year since this story was published) I'm happy with how it turned out, but I know there are a lot of things I could have done better or differently. It's not perfect by far, but it has been a huge learning experience for me as I figured out my style. Leaving this project I now am aware of weaknesses in my writing and things I want to improve. All these skills I will take with me as I continue to write and (in the event that you are despairing) don't despair! Even though the main story is over, I've had so much fun with these characters that I don't plan
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on leaving them alone any time soon ;3. I have a bunch of mini-stories and one-shots I want to write featuring Flame, Umber, Sora, Jet, Starfish, and others.

However, I also want to hear what you guys want to read! If you have requests/suggestions let me know! It can be about any characters featured in Healed, minor or major, or even just WOF characters in general. I can't promise I'll be getting stories out super-fast, but I'll keep a list of requests for those interested. Inbox me or leave your suggestions as a comment/review. Interacting with you guys is my favourite part of writing stories, so don't be shy!

Also, thank you to all those who left reviews! For those who have an account I tried to thank each of you individually and I just want you to know I am extremely grateful!

Anyway, I should probably wrap this up and let you get on with your lives. I'm just terrible at saying goodbyes, even if it's to a story.

Once again, thank you all so so so so so much for the kind words and support over the past year and don't forget to keep an eye out for more Healed stories if you're interested!